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Introduction

Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine

Forms, spaces, practices – these are the key terms that this book adopts for conceptualizing the current state and future directions of American literary studies in the twenty-first century. No longer organized exclusively by author, time period, genre, or nation, American literary studies is developing new paradigms and models that revise many of our standing assumptions about literary practice, literary categories, literary production, and the field of inquiry itself. No longer viewing American literature as a canon to be curated or an archive to be recovered and preserved, Americanists increasingly regard their object of study as a dynamic, multimedia, hybrid textual corpus, deploying a wide array of interpretive strategies and methods that help us to reconceive what we thought we knew about the study of American literature. It is the very dynamism of the field at the present moment that the 33 essays comprising this volume collectively represent.

In this way, A Companion to American Literary Studies offers a key and timely point of departure from other recent American literary studies collections. A Companion to American Literature and Culture (Lauter), for example, offers genealogical essays on the history of the field, along with essays on the authors and subjects central to American literary study. Rather than mapping out the various fields and subfields of American literary studies (regionalism, ecocriticism, transcendentalism, and so on), our volume focuses on critical work that is helping to transform the field itself. Accordingly, we include in our Companion essays by newer and established scholars whose thinking addresses the most provocative questions, subjects, and issues animating American literary studies. The essays represent and respond to changes and reorientations in the field, engage the increasingly diverse conceptions of American literary study, and

assess the unprecedented material changes occasioned by emerging digital, new media, and visual technologies. As a group, the essays provide readers with the knowledge and conceptual tools for understanding American literary studies as it is practiced today; a number of the essays also chart new directions for the field, pointing to future developments and possibilities. With its emphasis on a wide range of scholarly practices, the volume, we hope, can serve as an essential resource for anyone interested in the current state of American literary studies, as well as for anyone interested in the future of the field.

We undertake this collection because, at the present moment, the field of American literary studies finds itself at an exciting and potentially revolutionary point of transformation. Gender, race, ethnic, and women’s studies helped to transform the canon during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and new developments in hemispheric, transatlantic, transnational, and postnational studies have raised questions about the very viability of American literary studies (see, for example, Davidson and Hatcher; Kaplan and Pease; Levander and Levine; Manning and Taylor; Rowe). Does it make sense to continue to regard the literature of the US nation as constituting, in Richard Poirier’s well-known formulation, “a world elsewhere”? Questions of race, gender, ethnicity, and nation are at the center of many essays in this collection, as are essays that focus on Native American literature, queer studies, disability studies, postcolonial reconceptions of “early American” literature, and the human sciences. There are surprises here, such as an essay on medical imaging, which links up with other essays in the volume on the increasing importance of biology, genetics, and machines to American literary studies. The new digital studies poses pressing questions about textuality, audience, and nation, as do various interdisciplinary approaches to American literature, whether the focus is on law, history, religion, politics, disability, gender and sexuality, and/or other intersecting disciplinary formations. Taken together, the essays in the volume help us to see how American literary history might be told in the light of a number of new approaches to the field. The essays also help us better understand the histories and workings of the new approaches themselves.

But even as the essays point to the future, they are profoundly dialectical, showing the continuing importance of the literary and the national to American literary studies. In essays by Joel Pfister, Shirley Samuels, and many others, the literary itself provides ways of thinking about critical method, or, to put this differently, the literary is seen as a form of critical practice. Virtually all of the essays in the volume have literary works at the center of their discussions, making it clear that even the newest approaches tend to be inflected by an intense interest in the literary. There has been much recent talk about a renewed interest in aesthetics in American literary and cultural studies (Elliott, Caton, Rhyne), and this volume suggests that considerations of literary complexity, artistry, and vision remain central to the challenge of doing American literary studies. Similarly, though a number of essays in the volume raise questions, implicitly or explicitly, about the limits of conceiving of American literary studies solely in terms of the US nation (see, for example, the essays by George Handley and by Susan Gillman and Kirsten Gruesz), the nation remains central to
numerous essays in our volume, ranging from Elizabeth Fenton’s consideration of religion and American literature to the essays by Carla Peterson and Ramón Saldívar on African American literature and race. All of our contributors have moved beyond a literary-nationalist embrace of US exceptionalism, but that doesn’t mean that specific national histories — such as the role of millennialism in American thought, or the practice of slavery, or attitudes toward poverty in a supposedly classless nation — haven’t had an enormous impact on US literature. As the field of American literary studies becomes more globalized and comparative, the nation continues to exert its power (in all sorts of ways) as a category deserving of analysis. Essays in Part II of this volume, however, ask us to think about the nation in larger hemispheric, transatlantic, and global contexts.

We have organized the essays in A Companion to American Literary Studies around forms, spaces, and practices because these conceptual groupings work against the chronological and thematic analytic categories that often make up traditional literary histories. The essays in Part I, “Forms,” address aesthetic issues in a variety of ways, but generally take literary form as either their starting point or an integral concern; the essays in Part II, “Spaces,” focus their attention on geographies and temporalities in ways that raise questions about or revise our understanding of the national, or, better yet, the “American” in American literary studies. The essays in these two parts very centrally are also about literary practice; and the essays in “Spaces” in particular are about new ways of practicing American literary studies. Nevertheless, we have established a third grouping called “Practices” (Part III), guided by the idea that reconceived notions of literary forms and national, geographical, and temporal spaces are central to a number of what could be called the new and emerging subfields of American literary studies, such as law and literature, posthumanism, disability studies, and race studies. It is important to emphasize that our three conceptual sections are meant to highlight or foreground what we regard as the main emphases of the essays, and that we are well aware that our groupings are inevitably overlapping and palimpsestic. Even as we acknowledge that none of the essays can easily be contained within a single conceptual category, we find these categories illustrative of new perspectives in American literary scholarship on what constitutes the literary past, what generates the literary present, and what is possible for the future of the field.

Because of these shared interests, many of the essays produce provocative cross-talk between sections. Gender, for example, moves as a dynamic thread linking the nineteenth-century US novel (Samuels, “Forms”) to the worlds of color that become visible when we approach gender within a hemispheric system of meaning making (Stephens, “Spaces”). Approached from a transnational perspective, the labor dimension of gender systems gains a new legibility that resonates with our understanding of social inequality as represented in American literature (Jones, “Forms”). New mass culture modes of literary expression offer another powerful through-line connecting the three sections. Popular visualization techniques for disease (Ostherr, “Forms”), for example, function like and resonate with the unorthodox but deeply meaningful
transnational text networks that Gillman and Gruesz sketch in “Spaces.” Within the larger context of these kinds of text networks – ranging across time, space, and narrative forms, and, as Bentley illustrates, being long consonant with mass media ("Forms") – digital humanities can be seen as both an emergent mass culture phenomenon and a natural next iteration of a longstanding popular engagement with the disparate technologies of textual production (Cohen, "Practices") and the disparate textual productions of technology (Gilmore, "Forms"). We could also note that the issues of performance that Kodat addresses in "Forms" resonate in virtually every essay in the volume, whether on genre (Richards and Loeffelholz, "Forms"), new Caribbean regionalisms (Goudie, "Spaces"), Native American studies (Rifkin and Cox, "Spaces"), democratic cultures (Nelson, "Practices"), or gender and sexuality (Samuels, "Forms"; Looby, "Practices").

And yet, if the individual essays comprising the collection consistently resist, move across, and synergize our three conceptual groups, each section nevertheless has an internal cohesiveness and focus. In this respect, the essays in each section can be regarded as thought-experiments in key concepts central to how many scholars currently envision, teach, and critically interpret American literature.

For example, the first section purposefully revisits questions of aesthetics that have proven thorny over the years for Americanists. In his foundational and now somewhat dated *The American Renaissance* (1941), F.O. Matthiessen studies at great length what he terms “Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman,” while focusing on a limited canon of writers who are presented as having little to do with politics and popular culture. The essays grouped together in Part I, “Forms,” all share an exciting sense of the rich possibilities for rethinking art and expression in the wake of the canon expansion of the past several decades, which did much to unsettle fixed notions of the literary. Recent developments in performance studies and media studies have further expanded ideas of the literary, particularly in relation to form. Moreover, in response to the New Historicism, which worked with increasingly predictable models of subversion and containment, there has been a renewed interest in the power of the literary as well as in the complex and often mutually constitutive interplay between the literary and the cultural. Literary form has traditionally been thought of in relation to genre, but in this section our contributors address not only literary genres but also medical images, films, machines, and other extraliterary forms. In their considerations of form in various literary and cultural contexts, some of our contributors break down distinctions between the literary and social, exploring, for example, the close connections between social formations and literary formations (see, for example, Fenton on religion and Jones on class). Others insist on the sheer power of the literary (see Pfister in particular). With their interests in such matters as material culture, technology, popular culture, visual studies, and performance, the contributors in Part I offer fresh ways of thinking about art and expression and about the place of form, and form itself, in American literary studies. Overall, the essays in Part I can be understood as having a foundational place in our volume, reminding us of the importance of form, or art and expression, or the “literary” (however it is
understood) to any critical foray into how we might think about or reconceive American literary studies.

Part I begins with Russ Castronovo on the politics of literary form. Focusing on the propagandistic poems of the early national writer Philip Freneau, Castronovo shows how difficult it is to separate form (and questions of aesthetics) from politics. In the essay’s boldest move, Castronovo urges critics and readers to consider form as content; and in crucial respects all of the essays in Part I exemplify and put into practice the sort of literary-historical and critical work that Castronovo calls for. Joel Pfister, for instance, reads Franklin, Hawthorne, and other American writers as in effect doing their own historicist and critical work when writing about capitalism and alienation. Thus, in a somewhat Emersonian mode, Pfister insists on the importance of creative reading to Americanist scholarship. Similarly, Shirley Samuels, in her discussion of popular women’s novels of the mid-nineteenth century, illuminates how the tropes, figures, and concerns of the sentimental novel, indeed the very form of the sentimental novel, is the content, arguing that women writers of the time can be viewed as the historians and theorists who laid the groundwork for the feminist literary historians of the late twentieth century. The next three essays in Part I examine the intimate connections between literary and cultural forms. Attending to the general neglect of religion in American literary studies, Elizabeth Fenton discusses literary and religious writings, including *The Book of Mormon*, that work with and against what she terms a “secularization narrative.” Paul Gilmore recuperates what could be termed a “technology narrative,” exploring interrelationships between technological developments and literary expression in ways that challenge conventional notions of the incompatibility of technology and art. Americanists have long affirmed the close connections between democracy and US literary traditions, but in an essay that focuses on what could be called a “poverty narrative,” Gavin Jones argues that class itself can be understood as a formal component of the American novel, crucial to representations of social space in works ranging from Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* to Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Genre, performance, and the visual are crucial to the next four essays in Part I. Kirsten Ostherr discusses medical imaging as a genre of sorts – bounded in crucial ways by the body and available technologies while opening up new ways of thinking about the biocultural in a globalized US literature. Attending to the literary dimensions of such “extraliterary” forms as music and dance, Catherine Gunther Kodat points to the crucial role of performance both within and across literary genres, focusing on poetry and also helping us to reimagine ballet and music as part of a more expansive literary history in the twentieth-century United States. Jeffrey Richards and Mary Loeffelholz address genre as more traditionally understood, though performance remains crucial to their analyses as well. Richards’s study of theater from the colonial through the modern period examines the interconnections between social and dramatic performances, emphasizing how both are dependent on the visual (spectatorship). Loeffelholz notes the irony that popular US poetry has always been about the social and performative, but that poetry somehow continues to remain neglected by
critics interested in cultural history. Why, she asks, is a poet like Longfellow, whose work was so widely disseminated in the culture, and so clearly informed by (even as it shaped) the culture, regularly neglected, along with a host of other popular poets? Like Castronovo, Loeffelholz suggests that considerations of form as content may help to revitalize the study of US poetry. The final two essays in Part I offer case histories of the importance of form to literary and cultural expression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fleissner takes up the American Romance, regarded ever since Richard Chase’s The American Novel and Its Tradition (1957) as that which defines the distinctiveness of American fiction. Engaging traditional and new theories of American literary history, and in particular circling back to reconsider earlier critics’ insights into romance, she offers, through a close reading of Melville’s Billy Budd, a theoretically reenergized reading of the historical, political, and psychological aspects of the “genre” of romance—a reading that ultimately raises questions about “the romance of progress” in American literary studies. Nancy Bentley’s historicist reading of form during approximately the same period reveals how turn-of-the-twentieth-century mass-media—such as newspapers, films, advertising, popular novels, and sound recordings—had enormous consequences for literary culture. In the manner of Ostherr, she identifies cognitive shifts brought about by the impact of mass media, especially the visual, which call for new modes of literary analysis.

Even as the collection attends to the “forms” constituting the literary of American literary studies, it simultaneously takes seriously the geographic designator “American.” In the last few decades, scholars have become increasingly engaged by the geographic containers that have historically been used to sort and make sense of seemingly disparate literary traditions. No longer used as an equivalent for the United States, the term “American” has come to signify the complex and overlapping geopolitical imperatives at work in a myriad of literary cultural formations. The spaces of the American literary landscape, on the one hand, gesture to the entire Americas as networks of civic, social, racial, and political affiliations that link parts of the United States with hemispheric partners like Cuba, Haiti, and Mexico and at times reach well beyond the hemisphere to Asia and Africa. On the other hand, these same spaces refer to the dense array of regional communities that constellate and often prove to be even more powerful for their members than, what is for some, a hypothetical or intangible affiliation with the US nation. The essays comprising Part II, “Spaces,” approach the “American” of American literary studies from multiple perspectives and with divergent practices. Collectively illustrating that there are no simple answers to the question “Where is American literature?”, the essays in this section offer various ways of addressing that misleadingly simple question.

Take, for example, Anna Brickhouse’s analysis of the relationship between Cabeza de Vaca and the little-known Lope de Oviedo. Through careful elucidation of the thus far unremarked relation between these two figures, Brickhouse charts a radical alternative to the literary origins story that scholars have recently been telling about the United States—an origins story that we have, as she points out, often with a sense of self-congratulation revised to include the erased significance of a figure like
Cabeza de Vaca. Brickhouse challenges us to not simply add more texts to the canon of US literary culture, but more fundamentally to revisit the methods and critical assumptions we bring to the study of those texts. Gillman and Gruesz provide an important case study of how such a reconsideration of our critical assumptions and habits – our habituated impulse, for example, to read Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* within a national or Americas rather than a transatlantic frame – might generate rich new opportunities for understanding familiar texts like Melville’s novella of slave revolt. Arguing for a text-network approach to the study of individual authors and texts, Gillman and Gruesz relocate Melville’s novella within a framework that circulates from Europe to the Americas to Africa and back again. Refusing to firmly locate *Benito Cereno* within an American or US literary tradition, Gillman and Gruesz illustrate, opens up new interpretive possibilities for reading the transnational resonances and dialogues of which Melville was a key part. Like Gillman and Gruesz, Michelle Stephens reorients a founding fiction of American literary studies – in this case, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* – around a transnational scaffolding, exploring the worlds of color that become visible when we approach key themes of Hawthorne’s novel (labor, gender, and race) with an eye to hemispheric echoes and Americas-wide significance.

Just as Stephens takes up the full spectrum of geopolitical “spaces” with which a familiar author is concerned, the large-scale significance of transatlantic and transpacific studies in and for American literary studies is the focus of essays by Elisa Tamarkin and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Tamarkin addresses the question of transatlanticism as a category of analysis, charting the myriad ways in which the fact of Atlantic crossings shapes literature, cultural history, and national belongings. Fishkin brings attention to the transpacific as well as hemispheric engagements of an author like Mark Twain, showing how Twain resonates for Chinese writers and scholars as well as for famous Cuban writers like José Martí. Further, she explores how this unacknowledged dimension of Twain’s literary significance reorients what we think we know about a familiar literary figure – a figure that readers have historically equated with US literary heritage and nation-based social commentaries.

While many of the essays in “Spaces” gesture beyond the boundaries of the US nation, a number attend to the complex variations within the United States and between US regions and other regions of the Americas. John Matthews provides a nuanced and layered analysis of US Southern literary studies, at once acknowledging the field’s longstanding focus on the US South as a distinctive region within the United States and exploring Southern literary studies’ attentiveness to how this region connects with its southern neighbors – how the US South is part of a transnational, even global southern community with a shared history of slave owning, abolition, and colonialism, to name only a few examples. The interlocking literary histories that embed US writers known for their regionally focused writing (like Cormac McCarthy for the US-Mexico borderland or Sarah Orne Jewett for New England local color) are the focus of Sean Goudie’s and George Handley’s contributions. Taking what we assume to be distinctive regional traditions within the United
States, like the US-Mexico borderlands and New England, and illustrating their dynamic engagement with places like the Caribbean and Mexico, both essays chart powerful networks of literary production occurring across as well as within regional and national spaces.

Relatedly, Mark Rifkin and James Cox ask us to think about the enduring presence of Native American traditions and cultural imaginaries in American literary studies. With an eye toward the complex affective legacy of Native American history for American literary production, Rifkin analyzes such disparate materials as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and William Apess’s “Eulogy on King Philip,” suggesting that they offer us compelling examples of how Anglo-Americans envision Native peoples and settlement cultures. Cox asks us to approach tribal nation contexts from the perspective of American Indian writers. Focusing on three twentieth-century Cherokee Nation authors, Cox’s essay forms a dynamic dialogue with Rifkin’s, suggesting that regions within the United States have their own claims to nationhood that operate in creative as well as in political, social, and cultural tension with the US nation that surrounds them. Part II ends with a consideration, by Paul Giles, of the meaning and value of globalization for American literary studies. Tracking American literature’s longstanding engagement with globalization, Giles charts an American literary tradition that has been, to varying degrees, always already engaged in global thinking, perspectives, and concerns. From the nation’s origins stories to the hemispheric, transnational, and global networks in which American authors operate, the spaces of American literature, as the essays in this section suggest, are varied, ever changing, and intricately webbed across multiple geopolitical divides.

The “how” is as important to *A Companion to American Literary Studies* as the “what” and the “where” of the first two sections, respectively. And so the third section, “Practices,” explores the integration and implications of those topics outlined in “Forms” and “Spaces” with respect to how we undertake or do American literary studies. To repeat what we noted earlier in our introduction: all of the essays in Parts I and II are about practices as well, but the essays in Part III place an added emphasis on understanding crucial disciplinary fields or subfields, or overarching topics, integral to the larger project of American literary studies. Beginning this section is Dana Nelson’s analysis of arguably the core of US liberal democratic nationhood – the democratic practices that constitute federal order as well as the practices that contest and resist that order. Showing how American literature of the early national period emphasized the contention and disagreement dismissed by consensus narratives, Nelson illustrates how the practice of American democracy and the literary materials that helped to constitute, naturalize, and disseminate it to Americans were far from uniform or universally agreed upon. Brook Thomas carries this interest in democratic literary cultures into the realm of legal practices, charting American writers’ sustained interest in the law and discussing the consequences of that interest on literary form. Through considerations of authors ranging from Charles Brockden Brown to William Faulkner, Thomas reveals that the relationship between the practice of law
and the practice of literature has been enduring as well as ever changing. Christopher Looby’s essay takes us from the public realm of the courtroom to the more private realm of sexuality, demonstrating that American writers have been engaged with sexual as well as with legal or democratic issues. Focusing on Sarah Orne Jewett’s “Martha’s Lady,” but addressing a number of other works as well, Looby persuasively illustrates that passionate romantic friendships, erotic ties between same-sex partners, and queer identities have been a constitutive rather than ancillary or secondary feature of the practice of American literature. In other words, sexual practice is literary practice, and vice versa.

Priscilla Wald, Ursula Heise, and Michael Bérubé, in powerfully complementary essays, observe the myriad ways in which the practices of literary production and representation are biological and biomedical as well as social and geopolitical. Attentive to interactions of living organisms and their physical environments, Wald charts how the fields of both genetics and ecology in the post-World War II period informed American authors’ depictions of the human condition. Human contingency and the uncertain survival of the human species riveted the attention of science fiction writers as well as bestselling novelists like Sloan Wilson, whose The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit limns the close connections between fears of nuclear annihilation and the enhanced cultural prominence of the nuclear family. Heise examines responses to the new technologies of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries that disorder accepted practices associated with being human. Observing that a posthuman imaginary emerges out of surging interest in questions surrounding human life, Heise explores how American literature grapples with the question of how and if we should practice “humanism” – that is, whether we should continue to regard humans as a species apart or if we should adopt posthuman perspectives that understand humans as one of many animal species. Bérubé explores how narrative and intellectual disability are mutually implicating forces in American literature, from William Faulkner to Maxine Hong Kingston to much science fiction writing. Indeed it is the nation’s commitment to transforming nineteenth-century European scientific studies of intellectual disability into a rationale for tracking the American people’s collective and individual progress that makes American literature such a rich site for exploring the challenges and opportunities that narrative affords disability studies. At stake in these three essays is nothing less than the interlocking practices of being human and human being.

Similar issues are at stake in the three essays in Part III focusing on race. Given the long history of slavery and white supremacy in the United States, it is not surprising that race and ethnicity remain absolutely key terms in American literary studies, though crucial questions remain about how to approach these terms as categories of analysis. For Colleen Lye, the transnationalization of frameworks for understanding Asian American racial, ethnic, and literary identities reveals that Asian Americanness has always been in crisis, existing as a sociohistorical construct much more than as an identity defined by biological descent. Drawing on recent theoretical work in Asian
American studies, Lye proposes a nonlinear approach to Asian American literary history governed by fragmentation and disorderliness, and a clear-eyed skepticism about the stability of Asian American identity. Carla Peterson proposes a different sort of reorientation for nineteenth-century African American literary studies, urging critics to return to the archives in order to develop a more complex understanding of the historical genealogies of such concepts as race and diaspora. Challenging the binary that privileges Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois as the leaders who identified the social significance of these concepts at the turn into the twentieth century, Peterson underscores the importance of writings by the less well-known Alexander Crummell and James McCune Smith on black community and race. Crucially, Peterson identifies Smith as an intellectual who could be said, somewhat anachronistically, to have “deconstructed” race as a social construct, pointing the way to the postracial. Ramón Saldívar takes up what he calls “the postrace aesthetic” in recent writings by African Americans, showing how these writers may be some of our best current critics on matters of race. Saldívar’s essay, which speaks to the promises inherent in the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, begs the question of whether a postracial perspective, with its often wildly funny deconstructions of race, can trump the ravages of history and the persistence of whites’ antiblack racism.

The final essay of the collection comes full circle to questions of form and space and asks us to envision literary production within the context of the digital technologies that are transforming how we write, read, sort, and script American literature via the computer chip and Internet. From colonial writers to Walt Whitman to figures like Loss Pequeño Glazier and Mary-Anne Breeze, American authors have been consistently and enduringly fascinated with codes and technologies of literary expression. Challenging us to see digital modes of analysis and expression as part of a continuum, Matt Cohen reminds us that writers have always worked with form within the context of available technologies. Not an aesthetic pursuit separated from mass culture or technological innovation, American writing, as the contributors to this volume show, is built into the dense fabric of American life – its technologies, its playfulness, and its production of new ways of communicating the vitality of lived experience both within and beyond the nation.

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Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


