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A COMPANION TO

AMERICAN LITERATURE

General Editor: Susan Belasco

Volume I

Origins to 1820

EDITED BY

THERESA STROOTH GAUL

WILEY Blackwell
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Editors

Susan Belasco is Professor of English Emerita at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The author of numerous essays on nineteenth-century American literature, she is the editor or co-editor of several works, including *Stowe in Her Own Time* (2009), “Whitman’s Periodical Poetry” for the *Walt Whitman Archive*, *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, and the *Bedford Anthology of American Literature*.


Linck Johnson, Charles A. Dana Professor of English at Colgate University, is the author of numerous articles and book chapters on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, as well as *Thoreau’s Complex Weave: The Writing of “A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,” with the Text of the First Draft* (1986). He is the co-editor, with Susan Belasco, of the *Bedford Anthology of American Literature*.

Michael Soto is Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of English at Trinity University in San Antonio, where he teaches courses on twentieth-century US literature and cultural history. His books include *The Modernist Nation: Generation, Renaissance, and Twentieth-Century American Literature* (2004) and *Measuring the Harlem Renaissance: The U.S. Census, African American Identity, and Literary Form* (2016).
Sari Altschuler is Associate Professor of English at Northeastern University. She is co-editor of the recent Early American Literature issue on disability with Cristobal Silva and author of The Medical Imagination: Literature and Health in the Early United States (2018). Her work appears in American Literature, American Literary History, PMLA, and Lancet.

Stephen Carl Arch is Professor of English at Michigan State University. He is the author of two monographs and numerous scholarly articles on early American literature. Most recently, he has edited James Fenimore Cooper’s 1838 novel, Home as Found, for The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper (2020).

Eve Tavor Bannet is George Lynn Cross Professor Emeritus at the University of Oklahoma. She is editor of Eighteenth-Century Culture and series co-editor of the online collection “Eighteenth-Century Connections” at Cambridge University Press. Her most recent book is Manners of Reading: Print Culture and Popular Instruction in the Anglophone Atlantic World (2017), and she is currently completing a book on letters in novels.

Philip Barnard is Emeritus Professor of English at The University of Kansas. He has edited Charles Brockden Brown’s four canonical romances (with Stephen Shapiro) and is textual editor of the seven-volume Bucknell Collected Writings of Charles Brockden Brown edition, along with the Brown electronic archive.

Chiara Cillerai is Associate Professor at St. John’s University, NY. Her research focuses on eighteenth-century transatlantic literary culture and the Enlightenment. Her book Voices of Cosmopolitanism in Early American Writings and Culture (2017) reassesses the
terms in which we understand Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. She is currently co-editing a collection of Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson’s manuscript poems and other writings.

Jennifer A. Desiderio is Associate Professor of English at Canisius College. She is the co-editor of the Broadview edition of Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* and *The Boarding School* (2011), and the guest co-editor of a double special issue of *Studies in American Fiction* called *Beyond Charlotte Temple: New Approaches to Susanna Rowson* (2011). Her scholarship on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature has appeared in *American Periodicals*, *Early American Literature*, *Studies in American Fiction*, and *Legacy*.

Michael J. Drexler is Professor of English at Bucknell University. He is the co-editor of *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States* (2016) and co-author of *The Traumatic Colonel: The Founding Fathers, Slavery, and the Phantasmatic Aaron Burr* (2014). Currently, he is working on fugitive slave narratives and the American novel-form.

Patrick M. Erben is Professor of early American literature at the University of West Georgia. He is author of *A Harmony of the Spirits: Translation and the Language of Community in Early Pennsylvania* (2012) and editor of *The Francis Daniel Pastorius Reader* (2019).

Duncan Faherty is Associate Professor of English & American Studies at Queens College and The Graduate Center, CUNY. He is the author of *Remodeling the Nation: The Architecture of American Identity, 1776–1858* (2009) and is currently at work on a book about the Haitian Revolution and early US print culture.

Philip Gould is Israel J. Kapstein Professor of English, Brown University. He is the author, most recently, of *Writing the Rebellion: Loyalists and the Literature of Politics in British America* (2013).

Peter J. Grund is Associate Professor of English Language Studies at the University of Kansas. He is co-editor of *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (2009) and has published extensively on the historical, rhetorical, and linguistic aspects of the Salem trial records.

Sandra M. Gustafson is Professor of English and Concurrent Professor of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Her most recent monograph is *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (2011). She edits *Early American Literature* and the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. A.

Tamara Harvey is Associate Professor of English at George Mason University. Her research focuses on women and the early Americas. She is the author of *Figuring Modesty in Feminist Discourse Across the Americas, 1633–1700* (2008) and co-editor of books on George Washington and global gender justice today.
Elizabeth Hewitt is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the Ohio State University, Columbus. She is the author of *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770–1865* (2009) and a co-editor of *Letters and Early Epistolary Writings* (2013) in The Collected Writings of Charles Brockden Brown series.


Mark L. Kamrath is Professor of English at the University of Central Florida. He is the author or co-editor of various books on Charles Brockden Brown and has built with Philip Barnard and others an XML-based archive of Brown’s writings. He is general editor of The Charles Brockden Brown Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition.

Trish Loughran is Associate Professor of English and Affiliate Faculty in History and the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. She is the author of *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation-Building, 1776–1870* (2007).

Laura L. Mielke is Professor of English at the University of Kansas. She is the author of *Provocative Eloquence: Theater, Violence, and Antislavery Speech in the Antebellum United States* (2019) and *Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature* (2008), and co-editor of *Native Acts: Indian Performance, 1607–1823* (2011).

Andrew Newman is Professor of English and History at Stony Brook University. He is the author of *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory* (2012) and *Allegories of Encounter: Colonial Literacies and Indian Captivity* (2019).


Wendy Raphael Roberts is Assistant Professor of English at the University at Albany, State University of New York. She is completing a book on early evangelical American poetry. Her work has appeared most recently in *Early American Literature* and has been supported by a number of prestigious fellowships.

Kenneth M. Roemer, Piper Professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, co-edited *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2005), edited *Native American Writers of the US* (1997) and *Approaches to Teaching Momaday’s Way to Rainy Mountain* (1988), and authored four books on utopia, including a Pulitzer nominee.
Phillip H. Round is John C. Gerber Professor of English at the University of Iowa. His most recent book, *Removable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country, 1664–1880* (2010), was awarded the James Russell Lowell Prize from the Modern Language Association. His current research has been supported by a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship.

John Saillant is Professor of English and History at Western Michigan University. He is author of *Black Puritan, Black Republican* (2003), co-editor (with Joanna Brooks) of “Face Zion Forward” (2002), area editor of *African American National Biography* (2008), and author or editor of numerous articles and historical documents.

Jodi Schorb is Associate Professor of English at the University of Florida. Her interests include early American literature and life writing, eighteenth-century print culture, the history of literacy, and theories of gender and sexuality. She is the author of *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy, and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700–1845* (2014).

Ivy Schweitzer is Professor of English and past chair of Women’s and Gender Studies at Dartmouth College. Her fields are early American literature, women’s literature, gender, and cultural studies. Most recently, she edited a weekly blog, *White Heat*, about the year 1862 in the creative life of Emily Dickinson, which can be accessed at https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/whiteheat/.

Stephen Shapiro teaches in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. His publications include *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel: Reading the Atlantic World-system* (2008) and four edited volumes of Charles Brockden Brown’s romances (with Philip Barnard).

Cassander L. Smith is Associate Professor of English at the University of Alabama. Her research focuses on representations of black Africans in early Atlantic literature. Her publications include *Black Africans in the British Imagination: English Narratives of the Early Atlantic World* (2016).

Susan M. Stabile is Associate Professor of English at Texas A&M University. Her scholarly work in material culture includes *Memory’s Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (2004). She is currently completing a collection of creative non-fiction essays, *Salvage*, on the second life of objects and humans.

Timothy Sweet is Eberly Family Distinguished Professor of American Literature at West Virginia University. His publications include *Traces of War* (1990), *American Georgics* (2002), and *Literary Cultures of the Civil War* (2016). He is working on a study of agency and responsibility in extinction narratives.
Abram Van Engen is Associate Professor of English at Washington University in St. Louis. He is the author of *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (2015) and *The Meaning of America: How the United States Became the City on a Hill* (2020), along with several articles on early American religion, literature, and culture.

Kelly Wisecup is Associate Professor of English at Northwestern University. She is the author of *Medical Encounters: Knowledge and Identity in Early American Literatures* (2013) and a scholarly edition of Edward Winslow’s *Good News from New England* (2014).

Hilary E. Wyss is the Allan K. Smith and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of English at Trinity College, where she teaches courses in early American literature, American studies, and Native American studies. She is the author of over a dozen articles and book chapters as well as three books on Native American literacy practices in early America.
General Introduction

Susan Belasco

*A Companion to American Literature* is divided into three volumes – “Origins to 1820,” “1820–1914,” and “1914 to the Present” – each of which contains more than 30 chapters designed to aid twenty-first-century readers negotiate the rich and complex terrain of writings produced in the geographical region that became the United States. Beginning with the oral traditions of Native American peoples, these volumes trace the development of an American literature from the colonial period through the growth and rapid expansion of a vibrant print culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the emergence of electronic literature in the early years of the twenty-first century. At the same time, these volumes often challenge and complicate traditional notions of what constitutes and characterizes an “American literature,” a concept that has been under construction since the earliest years of the Republic. Certainly, the contributors to *A Companion to American Literature* take full advantage of the innovative research and scholarship of the last few decades, including significant archival work made possible by digital technologies; the recovery of a host of women and minority writers; important findings of book history, which includes new understanding of literary production and circulation; original theoretical formulations that question linear narratives of literary-historical development; and fresh ideas about the transnational and geopolitical nature of the United States.

Readers of the *Companion* will come away with a deep appreciation of the complexities involved in this ambitious project, as well as with a strong sense of the rich yields of such an inclusive approach to American literature. In various ways, the chapters in each volume address the social, political, geographic, domestic, and material contexts in which American literature has been produced and in which it is firmly grounded. A number of chapters describe the impact of the transformations in book and periodical production, the development of circulation and distribution systems, the rise of literacy, changing reading practices, trends in new media, new literary forms, and the influence of popular culture on literature. The important influences of race, ethnicity,
gender, identity, and class on American literature are a central part of many chapters, and the contributions of women, Native peoples, African Americans, Spanish-speaking populations, and a variety of immigrant groups are emphasized throughout the Companion. Further, many contributors take up the complexity of the transatlantic, transpacific, and trans-central networks and connections that were and are important to the construction of an American literature. While the emphasis is on imaginative, published writing and the traditional genres of fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fictional prose, especially life writing, contributors also consider the importance of oral traditions, as well as other kinds of writing crucial to the development of American literature, such as diaries, journals, letters, sermons and tracts, prayers, and histories. Our contributors have been committed to providing discussions of the most read and studied writers as well as providing introductions to the works of non-canonical writers integral to an inclusive, comprehensive, and historically accurate study of American literature. Finally, many chapters not only catalogue what we know or how we have traditionally approached a field but also indicate developing fields of inquiry right now and suggest, insofar as we can anticipate them, scholarly trends in the years to come.

Volume I: Origins to 1820

In her introduction, Theresa Strouth Gaul, the editor of Volume I, points to the “extraordinary flourishing, dynamism, and innovation of early American literary studies,” which have moved well beyond earlier models that generally began with the English Puritan settlement of New England and ended with the major political writers of the American Revolution. She rightly credits early literary histories with establishing the “richness of the field of early American literature” and traces the major changes that have taken place in our understanding of the cultural environment of Indigenous peoples and the earliest colonial settlers. In this conception, the canon, both figures and texts, is dramatically expanded to include “a larger range of people, communicative modes, geographical regions, and temporal moments.” The contributors to Volume I, beginning with chapters on Indigenous oral literature and cross-cultural encounters in the early years of exploration and settlement, write broadly about the varieties of literary forms that were produced by an extensive range of people from many regions — geographic, linguistic, cultural, and social. While long-established figures such as William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, Benjamin Franklin, and Charles Brockden Brown receive ample attention, other chapters are devoted to writers who have more recently entered the canon, including Olaudah Equiano, Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, Samson Occom, Susanna Rowson, and Phillis Wheatley. Contributors also provide detailed commentary about a whole host of other voices and movements, including, for example, the impact of Portugal’s fifteenth-century slave trade on African experiences in America; the importance of non-Anglophone histories and languages on literature; the impact of collaborative rather single authorship on texts that
we study; expanded categories of literature, such as captivity narratives, letters, and manuscript books, that move readers beyond the traditional literary genres; as well as fresh examinations of the influence of religious history and culture on the earliest American literature. The contributors to Volume I make a strong case for the reconsideration of the earliest American literature in light of a kaleidoscope of approaches and methods to reveal a rich and engaging body of works that move readers far beyond what Gaul refers to as the “Puritans-to-Revolution master narrative of early American literature.”

**Volume II: 1820–1914**

Linck Johnson, the editor of Volume II, begins his introduction by evoking a famous incident in literary history. In the *Edinburgh Review* in 1820, the British writer and clergyman Sydney Smith contemptuously asked, “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” Taken up by writers, reviewers, readers, and all manner of thinkers about the nature of the United States and its literature, that question reverberated throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Smith’s question served as a touchstone for the progress of American literature from 1820 to 1914, by which time it had come into its own through the efforts of a wide variety of diverse writers responding to the social, political, economic, and cultural changes of the period, especially the upheavals of the years before and after the Civil War. Johnson stresses that the volume charts “the ways in which the country’s literature began to mirror the full diversity of society and culture in the United States.” While individual chapters focus on the work of major figures such as Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, and Henry James, other chapters explore the connections between the work of well-known authors and their significant but lesser-known contemporaries, for example Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau and Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. The work of a host of other authors is also considered, including a wide range of African American, Native American, Latina/o, and immigrant writers, some of whom wrote in languages other than English. Indeed, the volume has been powerfully shaped by ongoing work in a number of often related areas: efforts to recover the writings of women and people of color; scholarship on the development of the literary marketplace and the impact of social protest and reform movements, especially abolitionism and women’s rights; and theoretical studies concerning the body and sexuality, disability, gender, and race. Drawing together these and other recent strands of scholarship, the contributors to Volume II create a lively depiction of American literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in all its diversity and complexity. As Johnson explains, by the end of the period covered in the volume, “the challenging question was no longer ‘who reads an American book?’ but rather ‘what constitutes an American book, or indeed an American?’”
Volume III: 1914 to the Present

In his introduction, Michael Soto, the editor of Volume III, is also concerned with what constitutes “American literature,” in this case a national literature that had, in the early years of the twentieth century, become a “fully professionalized” study in schools, colleges, and universities. Soto outlines the thinking of the early scholars of American literature who divided the twentieth century into “modern,” the years after World War I, and “postmodern,” the years after World War II. While it continues to operate as a useful marker, that distinction was largely based on a literary canon that was primarily white and male. As Soto observes, scholarship in the last five decades, especially the work of feminist scholars, has been devoted to expanding the canon and providing a more accurate view of the literature written in the United States during the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Just as contributors to the first and second volumes have benefited from the extensive archaeological and archival research that has complicated the notion that American identity and culture was fundamentally forged by the Puritan founders of New England, contributors to this volume have, as Soto explains, produced a literary-historical map that differs markedly from the one so confidently drawn by literary scholars early in the twentieth century. The contributors to this third volume have likewise taken advantage of a variety of new ways of thinking about social, economic, political, and cultural change – and the ways in which those ideas impact writers and literary works. The works of many familiar writers are discussed within these chapters – for example, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Langston Hughes, Tennessee Williams, and Ralph Ellison, as well as more recently canonized figures such as Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, and Sherman Alexie. At the same time, chapters address a variety of topics and themes such as proletarian literature, which takes up the challenges to capitalism in the 1930s; women writers and the origins of the Harlem Renaissance; nature writing and environmentalism; Asian American and Native American literary forms; and the graphic novel as a new literary form. As in the other volumes, the technologies of reading and literary production are clearly addressed. This volume thus concludes with a dynamic discussion of digital technology and the future of reading and literature in the United States.

Arrangement and Contents

Each of the volumes of the Companion includes a full Table of Contents for all three volumes, a Table of Contents for the individual volume, notes on the editors and contributors, and a general introduction to the entire three volumes, followed by an introduction to the individual volume written by the volume editor. That, in turn, is followed by a chronology that connects the publication of literary events with significant historical events of that year, designed to serve as a guide and handy reference for readers. Each chapter in the volume includes a list of references and, in most cases, an annotated list of further reading in both print and electronic resources. Finally, the volumes conclude with a general index for easy reference.
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Introduction to Volume I

Theresa Strouth Gaul

A powerful narrative of absence and inferiority shaped the understanding of early American literary history for most of the twentieth century. Despite work by Roy Harvey Pearce, Perry Miller, and Sacvan Bercovitch, eminent scholars whose careful studies established the richness of the field of early American literature, the canonization and celebration of a narrow range of American authors of the mid-nineteenth century by scholars like F.O. Matthiessen exerted a firm and unyielding hold over the literary-historical narrative. Critics typically imagined this approximately 200-year period – beginning with English Puritan settlement in New England in 1620 and ending in the decade before the beginnings of the so-called American Renaissance of the 1830s – as possessing only a few moments of literary-historical significance: the Puritan origins of the American literary tradition, the melding of European Enlightenment ideas with the religious revivalism of the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, and the founding of the American nation and identity in the Revolutionary era of the late eighteenth century. Anthologies of American literature that began to be published for the burgeoning college enrollments of the 1960s and 1970s promulgated this narrative.¹ These textbooks typically presented the work of perhaps a few Puritan writers (often John Winthorp, William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Cotton Mather), even fewer early eighteenth-century authors (perhaps Sarah Kemble Knight, William Byrd, and Jonathan Edwards), and a handful of Revolutionary-era figures (likely Benjamin Franklin, John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Thomas Jefferson, and Philip Freneau). The period from the Revolutionary war to 1820 was usually ignored, though perhaps some attention was devoted to Washington Irving. Undergirded by exceptionalism and nationalism, the Puritans-to-Revolution master narrative of early American literature, as I will call it, ensured that most literature from this early period was viewed as not worthy of serious study and was acknowledged as significant only insofar as it established the foundations of “America”
or prepared the way for the purportedly superior flowering of American literature that followed in the mid-nineteenth century.

Much has changed in the literary-historical landscape in recent years, however, and this volume demonstrates perhaps one of the most significant developments in the broader field of American literary study over the last two decades: the extraordinary flourishing, dynamism, and innovation of early American literary studies. Even if one only tracks numbers of pages as an indicator of stature, it speaks volumes, if you will, that in this Companion to American Literature the early American period is given equal weight—a full volume—with the nineteenth century (Vol. II) and with the twentieth through twenty-first centuries (Vol. III). As a point of contrast, the Cambridge Introduction to American Literature (Bercovitch 1994–2005) devotes just one volume out of eight to the period before 1820.

Newly available intellectual currents provide some explanation of the rapid maturation of the field on display in this volume. The rise of New Historicism in the 1980s, along with the development of cultural studies, invigorated the study of a literature that had always been obviously and unmistakably embedded in its historical and cultural contexts. The growth over several decades of women’s, African American, and Native and Indigenous studies, along with other identity-based fields of inquiry, demonstrated the vast potential for the recovery of diverse texts and voices and the necessity of reinterpreting familiar ones. The prospering of the field of book history identified vocabulary and methods for examining print and material culture as well as publication and circulation networks. The “transnational turn” of the 2000s provided theoretical and methodological tools for dismantling nationalism as the primary framework through which to read early texts, which were written in periods that preceded nation formation and which were ineluctably transnational and hemispheric in nature and reach. The more recent “religious turn” and its interrogation of secularity narratives long holding sway over understandings of the period have enabled a more nuanced consideration of a fuller range of religious doctrines, expressions, and practices. The wealth of resources made available through digital technologies and the accompanying questions posed by digital humanities have reshaped the early American archive and the critical horizons within which scholars and students work. Finally, the Society of Early Americanists, founded in 1990 by Carla Mulford, Sharon M. Harris, and Rosemary Guruswamy, and its biennial conference created forums and communities within which to generate and disseminate scholarship, along with several journals in the field.

As a result, the field of early American literary study is more expansive, diverse, and complicated than it seemed even two decades ago. The canon of noteworthy figures and texts drastically broadens to include a larger range of people, communicative modes, geographical regions, and temporal moments. While long-recognized figures, historical events, and genres continue to garner critical attention, the inquiry is carried out through different methodologies and forwards new kinds of questions. This volume is the result of these contexts: a long-held master narrative of literary history that cracked under the strain of its own inadequacies, the emergence of new and newly energized approaches, and scholars who have revised old ideas and embraced alternative visions.