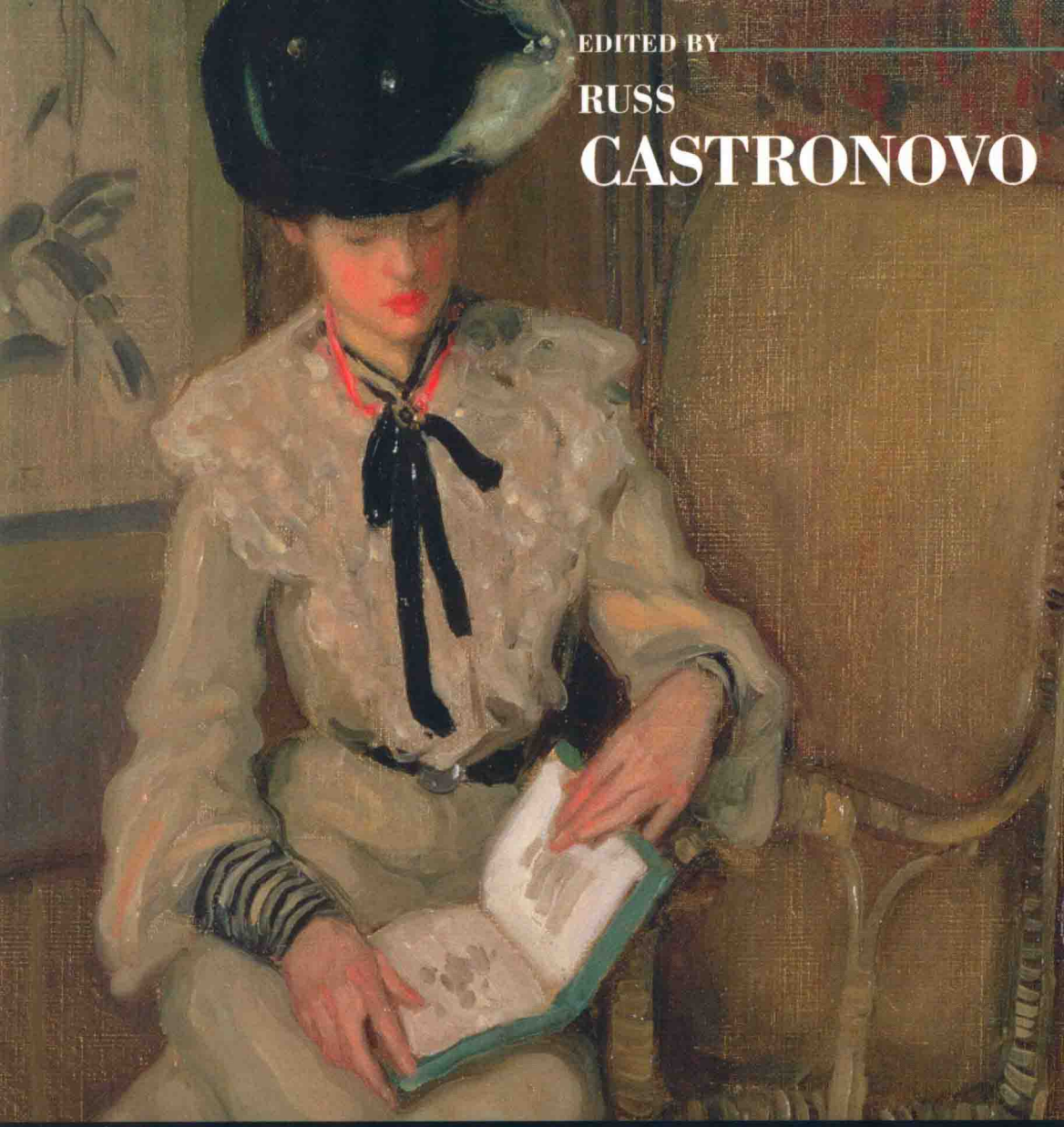

EDITED BY

RUSS CASTRONOVO

The Oxford Handbook *of* NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION: SHIFTS, ZIGZAGS, IMPACTS

RUSS CASTRONOVO

NINETEENTH-CENTURY American literature is not going anywhere. As an eminently convenient rubric for identifying texts, assembling a field of study, and establishing critical patterns, this literary historical designation remains very much a product of its time, defined by its moment and place. A handy one-hundred-year span demarcates recognizable temporal limits. National geography provides different but equally workmanlike coordinates—an author's birthplace, setting, place of publication, and the like—for identifying American literature as American, tautological as that undertaking may be. From such a perspective, one might reasonably expect the field boundaries of nineteenth-century American literature to have been set long ago, perhaps at the end of the last century, and that they are not going to change very much in the coming one.

Fortunately, the boundaries of nineteenth-century American literature are not so ironclad as to limit the field to fiction, poetry, essays, or drama written within the United States between the years 1801 and 1900. There are at least three challenges to such a narrow understanding: (1) the idea of the long nineteenth century; (2) the asymmetry of the United States and America; (3) the expansion of literature beyond traditional genres. In fact, almost all the chapters in this volume expand—or explode—the idea of nineteenth-century American literature along one or more of these axes. In terms of this interlocking trio of new directions, it is not simply that understandings about what this body of literature is and how it functions might change; rather, more profoundly, it is that this seem-

ingly complete tradition is always experiencing changes in shape, definition, and possibility.

The long nineteenth century stretches from 1789 to 1914, bracketed by the French Revolution and the start of World War I. These signposts, as proposed by the historian Eric Hobsbawm, have unmistakable European accents. Nevertheless, they invite musings about what an elongated American version might look like. At one end, the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), the ratification of the U.S. Constitution (1787), the *Vente de la Louisiane* (the Louisiana Purchase of 1803) and, at the other end, the opening of the Panama Canal (1914), the landing of U.S. Marines in Haiti (1915), the U.S. entry into World War I (1917), the Pan-African Congress of 1919, or even the crash of the U.S. stock market (1929) are all significant arguments for lengthening the nineteenth century from American vantage points that reference but are surely broader than the United States. As readers of this *Oxford Handbook* will discover, an expanded time frame for this literature encompasses James Fenimore Cooper's nineteenth-century historical novels about eighteenth-century settlement and frontier racial warfare just as it includes Toni Morrison's twenty-first-century examination, by way of her commentary on Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, of three centuries of slavery in the Americas.

Even more profound—and usefully disruptive—has been critical attention to texts written beyond what was then or is now the sovereign borders of the United States. This turn to transamerican sources from the Caribbean, Canada, Latin America, the Southwest, and the Atlantic hemisphere, including sources not written in English, represents a shift in the thinking about what, after all, makes American literature American. By what "rules" does American literature have to be written in English? The promise as well as the problem of transnational American literature is taken up and debated at several points in this volume. The authors here hardly agree on the overall import or potential of this widened America, what the Cuban poet and patriot José Martí called "nuestra América," but certain it is that this sensibility challenges many of the familiar assumptions regarding the Americanness of American literature.

If this critical geographic axis leads to questions about the Americanness of American literature, a third line of inquiry takes aim at the literariness of the field. Do only familiar genres—the novel, the poem, the essay—count as literature? What places do philosophical reflection (to choose one end of the spectrum) or mass-market journalism and magazine writing (to choose the other end) occupy on the bookshelf of American literature? So, too, more than one of the chapters focus their interpretative energies on nonverbal texts by examining nineteenth-century illustrations, religious-themed board games, and other artifacts of visual and material culture. In thus focusing on the formal as well as contextual attributes that make American writing literary, the trajectory of this *Oxford Handbook*, moving from "Shifts" to "Zigzags" to "Impacts," spurs mediations on the complex role that American literature qua literature plays in our thinking about and acting in the world.

Under this schema, nineteenth-century American literature hardly seems to be a self-evident category. The field is so much more than its name implies. It extends

both backward and forward, making a mess of any presumptions about temporal demarcations that seem neatly keyed to a hundred-year time span. Likewise, the field pays little heed to nationalist checkpoints since the idea of America, under which might be classed various histories of and beliefs about liberty, racial identity, religion, art, and humanity, has never been isomorphic to the geopolitical entity of the United States. Finally, American literature hardly looks the same when that looking opens onto visual texts, which, from a more traditional perspective, have often seemed somehow different or less than literary.

For all the ways in which the field can appear new and different, these changes to the time and space of nineteenth-century American literature should not distract us from the fact that literary and other materials can—and regularly do—take shape within familiar rubrics. Spatial and temporal considerations force us to recognize that American literature is necessarily finite, bounded by the very delimitations that the long nineteenth century, the broadened idea of America, and an eye for popular materials all seek to overcome. Writers and texts fall in and out of fashion—how regularly do poets like William Cullen Bryant or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the authors of former schoolroom standards, now appear in college courses?—but incremental changes to canons and reading lists only rarely shift the overall shape of the field. When a long-lost nineteenth-century novel by Louisa May Alcott, *The Inheritance*, was unearthed in 1988, it quickly became part of classic American literature (a major publishing house markets the novel as a "classic"), but without substantively impacting the field, for instance, by transforming the ways we read or understand relations among texts. With the exception of remarkable finds such as this one, it is not as if a bevy of freshly discovered novels are going to be added every decade.

The more pressing task has been to raise new questions about familiar texts, to suggest the importance of expanded contexts, indeed, to change how this area of study itself is constructed and used. New critical developments, such as the interest in cultural productions throughout the Americas, have an impact that is more profound than recovering texts once lost to literary history and simply adding them to the tradition. This depth is found in refreshed thinking about such critical nodes as the natural environment, capital and its flows, whiteness and the process of racialization, and print culture and circulation that emerge from transnational and hemispheric realignments of American literature. What's more, this sort of spatial remapping of the field represents but one avenue of transformation. The three sections of this volume register the multiple and competing senses of newness that can enter a field that is seemingly as established, as predictable, in a word, as old as nineteenth-century American literature.

Instead of merely outlining a topic of study such as gender or nation, "Shifts," "Zigzags," and "Impacts" each explores how readers identify and tackle interpretative problems, of how we approach texts that range collectively, as the chapters in this volume do, from recognizable books such as Henry James's *The American* to popular but now obscure artifacts such as Edward Maturin's *Montezuma, the Last of the Aztecs*, from the philosophical abstractions of Ralph Waldo Emerson to the

intimately grounded articles featured in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and from the globetrotting of Washington Irving to the intensely local sensuousness that Henry David Thoreau found in a patch of huckleberries. The contributors to this volume are united in foregrounding issues of method and approach, focusing on how critics and students read, understand, and make use of American literary and cultural texts. "Shifts," "Zigzags," and "Impacts" suggest a range of unfamiliar yet practical coordinates for revising, questioning, and unsettling what we think we know and mean when we take novels, poems, and other discursive and visual artifacts as somehow emblematic or belonging to the body of nineteenth-century American literature. Unlike the predominant patterns for a good deal of history (and historiography), straight lines are downplayed under this tripartite schema. In practical terms, the organizational structure implies that this handbook does not need to be read in sequence from beginning to end. Multiple and varied are the paths that lead through this volume. The three sections highlighted here emphasize the connections as well as contentions that characterize the project as a whole. More than anything, they motivate questions that do not invite a single or easy answer but rather impel continuing investigation and debate. Such questions can be keyed to the individual chapters within each section.

Shifts

- **What happens when maps of national literature are shifted onto a cosmopolitan axis?** In responding to this question, Paul Giles looks at Washington Irving within the broad framework of global narratives.
- **How does moving away from aesthetic criteria of unity and toward those of chaos require new approaches to African American literature?** This is the task that John Ernest undertakes in his chapter on William Wells Brown, Martin Delany, and William Grimes in the context of African American literary and cultural theory.
- **By what criteria does a literary work count as an American novel?** Beginning with this fundamental question, Jordan Alexander Stein turns to Melville, who time and again thwarted the conventional expectations for literary narrative.
- **How does an orientation informed by disability studies shift understandings of race?** Mark Twain's entangling of slavery and nonnormative bodies is a good place to begin searching for answers, as Ellen Samuels contends.
- **In what ways does Creole consciousness give fresh accents to accounts of discovery and anticolonial resistance?** For Jesse Alemán, the answer entails an investigation of the role played by Mexican America in the U.S. literary imagination.

- **Why do novels about New World families knock notions of liberal subjectivity off their stable centers?** Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Melville, and James, in Nancy Bentley's explanation, have much to say on the topic of kinship and privacy.
- **How does the expansion of mass-market visual culture shape literary meanings in the nineteenth century?** To answer this question, Shelley Streeby provides a transnational history of the Haymarket bombing and executions.
- **How might American literature be situated in a modern world system of the racialized Atlantic world?** Anna Brickhouse plots a surprising course that ranges from Hawthorne to Toni Morrison, from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth and beyond.

Zigzags

- **How does the "complicated zigzag" of U.S. empire building inflect the relationship between frontier romances and white imperialism?** Robert Levine's answer travels a path, full of unexpected reversals, that moves from Cooper to George Copway, an Ojibwa Indian.
- **How do American writers access social and political phenomena that elude visual perception?** As Jeffrey Steele demonstrates, Lydia Maria Child, George Lippard, Fanny Fern, and other authors who toured, investigated, and ambled around city spaces confronted this challenge posed by urbanization.
- **Why do nineteenth-century views upon human subjectivity repeatedly cross into the terrain of the nonhuman and animals?** In considering this question, Colleen Glenney Boggs offers subtle readings of John Locke, Emily Dickinson, and theorists of what has become known as animal studies.
- **How does archival research change what we think we know about American authors?** Documents left by Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Hannah Crafts, as Shirley Samuels shows, continue to revise standard assumptions about the American canon and its outliers.
- **What does it mean to say that people in the nineteenth century read religiously?** For Gregory Jackson, the pursuit of this question follows the tortuous pathways depicted in homiletic novels such as Alcott's *Little Women* or Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur*.
- **How do we draw lines between literature and other forms of discourse?** In examining the interlacing of philosophy and literature during the nineteenth century, Maurice Lee shows why any answer to this challenge must begin with skepticism.

- **How should we evaluate transnational American studies?** Jared Hickman tracks across continents and regions in a chapter that ranges from Thomas Paine to Simón Bolívar and from James to José Vasconcelos.

Impacts

- **What impact did authors and readers think that reading had upon the formation of social bonds?** As Travis Foster suggests, answers lie in the rich archive of regionalism found in the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the short stories of Sarah Orne Jewett.
- **How does literature speak to its contemporary situation?** Elisa Tamarkin takes up this question by connecting novels, ranging from George Lippard's popular works to the literary-minded productions authored by Henry James, to the explosion of newspapers and the daily events reported in their pages.
- **How does literature shape minds?** Drawing on Kate Chopin and Charles Brockden Brown in the contexts of neuroscience, Paul Gilmore argues for an approach attuned to the history of mental processes.
- **What are the ethics of using and making examples out of people?** For Elizabeth Duquette, this investigation is best pursued by reading literature, especially the work of William Wells Brown and Douglass, as philosophy.
- **What is the relationship between literary critical practice and human rights?** This profoundly ethical question posed by James Dawes leads to an examination of abolitionism, as it was conceived and practiced by Emerson, Stowe, Douglass, and William Lloyd Garrison.
- **"How do we compare?"** In posing this question, Susan Gillman examines social protest literature authored—and adapted—by Stowe, Helen Hunt Jackson, and José Martí.
- **"What is to be done with nineteenth-century American literature" in an era of global climate change?** In taking up this unsettling question, Stephanie LeMenager turns to Thoreau, John Muir, Walt Whitman, George Perkins Marsh, and other nineteenth-century defenders of Nature.
- **Can nineteenth-century American literature provide lessons for twenty-first-century citizenship?** For Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson, a consideration of Stowe in conjunction with the actions of John Brown raises some interesting possibilities.

Amid this diversity of texts and topics, these questions share the consistent thread of method and approach. How do we approach the field? How do we recalibrate the coordinates of critical vision? How do we open up new areas of investigation?

It might be said that in the closing decades of the twentieth century, critics put especial pressure on *what* was included in the American literary canon. Beginning in the 1980s, canon deformation altered the landscape of American literature, making a case for the inclusion of texts by women, working-class writers, African Americans, Latino/as, and other ethnic minorities. Important editorial projects, including the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, the American Women Writers Series, and Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage, have ensured that literary scholarship and course syllabi no longer look as they once did a generation ago. While this attention to identity categories occasioned sharp debate during the so-called culture wars, the result has been a more nuanced literary history. Attention to race, class, and gender in the 1980s and 1990s—and fortunately this attention has not waned—entails a complex accounting of the intersections among these markers as opposed to a singular focus upon any one of these categories. This ameliorative pattern has continued so that considerations of sexuality, sovereignty, disability, environments, regions (like the Atlantic or the hemisphere), imperialism, and transnationalism have provoked generative debates about topics that were once ignored (such as disability), taken for granted (such as the natural environment), or disavowed (such as the history of imperialism). In the twenty years or so leading up to the close of the twentieth century, notions of *what* constitutes nineteenth-century American literature experienced radical revision, widening the scope of both *American* (to include hemispheric, transnational, and diasporic expressions) and *literature* (to include pamphlets and tracts, journals and diaries, dime novels, oral narratives, theatrical performances, legal decisions, scientific accounts, graphic texts, folk materials, and so on).

These welcome challenges to the component terms of American literature have changed the study of the nineteenth century sometimes so quickly that students and scholars have not always had the chance to evaluate and consider what these changes mean. In other words, in addition to the focus on *what* constitutes the canon of nineteenth-century literature, critical readers must also address the questions of *how* and *why*. Why is it significant that texts ranging from maritime narratives (think of Cooper, Melville, and Poe's contributions to this genre) to slave narratives (think of Frederick Douglass's and Harriet Jacobs's sojourns in England) are now frequently perceived as transnational performances? Why is it significant that Billy Budd's stutter, Roger Chillingworth's hunched back, Magawisca's severed limb in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, or the broken-down workers in Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* can be recognized as figures of disability? How do John Muir and Whitman encourage new departures in the thinking about the imbrications of humans and the natural world? In other words, surely the point of a transnational reading must be something more than the demonstration that a text is transnational just as readings indebted to disability studies or environmental criticism must offer an interpretative payoff that is more than a thematic hunt for nonnormative bodies or variations on nature as the romantic sublime. Even as the chapters in this volume examine specific works of nineteenth-century literature, they also seek to address the implications about the scope and scale of analysis that