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theories and  
methodologies

## What's in a Date? Temporalities of Early American Literature

IT'S TIME FOR A POP QUIZ. YOU HAVE TEN MINUTES. (IS YOUR HEART RACING? TAKE A DEEP BREATH.)

What major events in American literature and American history took place in and around the following years?

- (1) 1789
- (2) 1800
- (3) 1820
- (4) 1830

SANDRA M. GUSTAFSON

Time's up. Now for some answers.

(1) The chief historical event of 1789 should not be too hard to identify. What landmarks of American literature occurred as the war for independence was winding down and a new federal government established? *Letters from an American Farmer* appeared in 1782. Phillis Wheatley died prematurely in 1784, when she was in her early thirties. Other notable poets, including Annis Boudinot Stockton and Philip Freneau, wrote some of their better-known works in the 1780s. Thomas Jefferson wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia* in the early 1780s. He included Logan's speech, which helped spark a long-lasting vogue for Native American eloquence. Reluctant to publish, Jefferson at first circulated his work in manuscript, but after it appeared in a pirated version he prepared the authorized edition of 1787. In the same year Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* was performed for the first time. Benjamin Franklin returned to the project of writing his life story in the late 1780s, after an extended hiatus caused by the war. In 1789 William Hill Brown brought out *The Power of Sympathy*, which is sometimes described as the first American novel. Deliciously coinciding with the ratification of the Constitution, this salacious tale of incestuous desire and suicide had literary resonances for the *Werther* crowd and real-life antecedents among the Boston power elite.

(2) 1800 is a watershed year in the development of American fiction. That year marks the high point of Charles Brockden Brown's achievements as a novelist and literary theorist. The four novels that Brown wrote between 1798 and 1800—*Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Edgar*

SANDRA M. GUSTAFSON is a member of the faculty at the University of Notre Dame, where she teaches in the English department and at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, and the editor of the MLA-affiliated journal *Early American Literature*. Her most recent monograph is *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (U of Chicago P, 2011). She was awarded an NEH fellowship for 2014 to complete a book on democracy and American fiction that draws on peace studies methodologies.

*Huntly*, and *Arthur Mervyn*—drew international attention and established him as a writer's writer. The novel decisively emerged as a major new form in the years leading up to the century's turn. Shifting from drama to fiction, Tyler published *The Algerine Captive* in 1797, the same year that Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* appeared and three years after the first American edition of *Charlotte Temple*, by Susanna Rowson. Hugh Henry Brackenridge first published *Modern Chivalry* in the 1790s and brought out a revised edition in 1815. The central historical event of 1800 was the election of Thomas Jefferson, whose defeat of the one-term wonder John Adams was seen by many to mark a decisive break from a quasi-aristocratic political culture based on hierarchy and deference. Adams's fearful response to the French Revolution contrasted with Jefferson's willingness to water the tree of liberty with the blood of patriots and tyrants. His election is sometimes seen as setting the United States on a course toward Jacksonian democracy—that is, democracy understood as universal white manhood suffrage tied to national expansion, Indian removal, and slavery. Thus, it is significant that nine editions of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* appeared between 1789 and 1794. The first American edition, an unauthorized one, came out in 1791. Equiano died in 1797, and the next edition of his narrative did not appear until 1809. Several more followed, including a Boston edition of 1837.

(3) Twenty years after the historic election of 1800, lawmakers fashioned the Missouri Compromise as a temporary solution to the slavery problem, which had emerged after the War of 1812 as an issue with serious potential to divide the United States for the first time since the passage of the Constitution. The best-known living American writer in 1820 was probably Washington Irving, who published the tales and essays that make up *The Sketch-book* serially in the United States during 1819 and 1820 and collected them in

a two-volume British edition of 1820. *The Sketch-book* included his most famous works, "The Legend of Sleepy-Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle," which reprise German legends, setting them in Hudson Valley Dutch communities, and celebrate cultural continuity. Many of the other sketches focus on British culture and customs, while "Traits of Indian Character" and "Philip of Pokanoket" consider the place of indigenous traditions in American society. William Cullen Bryant's first collection of poems established his reputation for nature poetry and poetry with indigenous themes when it appeared in 1821. James Fenimore Cooper entered the literary scene in 1820 with the publication of *Precaution*. He quickly followed up this derivative novel of English manners with works in the genres for which he became famous: tales of the Revolutionary War, sea novels, and frontier fiction. Cooper was joined in this last endeavor by Lydia Maria Child, who published *Hobomok: A Tale of Early Times* in 1824, and by Catherine Maria Sedgwick, whose novel *Hope Leslie* appeared in 1827. The debates over Indian removal during the decade after the Missouri Compromise contributed to the prominence of Native American themes and characters in these and other works, such as John Augustus Stone's *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, and to the emergence of indigenous authors, including William Apess, who published the first edition of his autobiography, *A Son of the Forest*, in 1829, the same year as *Metamora* was produced.

(4) By 1830 the trajectory of American history was set. Two landmark events in that year established the troubled course for the future: the passage of the Indian Removal Act and the Webster-Hayne debate, in which the contest between North and South over the direction of the United States was laid out in stark terms. Polemical works published around this time by Apess and the black abolitionist writer David Walker projected the long-term consequences of these legislative

developments. Over the course of this decade Bryant turned increasingly to political concerns, and John Greenleaf Whittier wrote several of his most famous political poems. The 1830s also saw the appearance of two writers included in F. O. Matthiessen's field-defining work *American Renaissance* (1941): Nathaniel Hawthorne, who published some of his best short fiction in the early 1830s, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who brought out *Nature* in 1836, followed quickly by "The American Scholar" and "The Divinity School Address." Edgar Allan Poe, whom Matthiessen notoriously excluded from his critical history, published some important poems and early stories at the beginning of the decade. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, with its barely sublimated racial themes, appeared in 1838 and *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* in the following year.

So how did you do on the quiz? Have a cookie.

We have been covering dates that correspond to configurations of the early period in American literary history as it is constructed in anthologies, professional organizations, and scholarly periodicals. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* breaks the field at 1800, as do the MLA in its division structure and the Society of Early Americanists, while *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* divides it at 1820. That is also the terminal date for the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the field's leading historical journal. *Early American Studies* extends its consideration of history and culture through 1850. C19, the new society for nineteenth-century Americanists, recently launched the journal *J19*, which takes as its purview the period from 1789 to 1914, a long nineteenth century bounded by the ratification of the Constitution and the beginning of World War I. This configuration of the field makes nation formation the signal event that separates earlier from later litera-

ture. *Early American Literature*, the journal of the MLA's Division on American Literature to 1800, which is poised to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2015, extends its purview through the early national period, to around 1830. This capacious period definition claims everything prior to the American Renaissance writers, marking a literary rather than a political watershed.

My quiz is intended to suggest some of the stakes, literary and more generally cultural, of choosing one field definition over another. There is a consensus that early American literature ends before the emergence of the American Renaissance writers and the Civil War. Dividing the field at 1800 highlights the rising novel, a genre often associated with cultural democratization, while breaking at 1820 foregrounds a shift in representational energies from the Atlantic rim toward the continental interior. If 1789 is the beginning of a long nineteenth century, then the literature that comes before that date is defined by its coloniality, not by the protonationalism of the Puritans. Falling a bit before that date, *Letters from an American Farmer* looks backward, as perhaps befits the Loyalist tendencies of its author, rather than forward to an independent United States. Franklin's *Autobiography* and Jefferson's *Notes* straddle the Treaty of Paris compositionally and conceptually, while Wheatley falls entirely, and uneasily for such a forward-looking writer, on the colonial side of the divide. Cleaving the field around 1830, as *Early American Literature* does, tends to amplify the novelty of the American Renaissance writers. The impact of Irving on Hawthorne or of Cooper on Melville can be lost in the rush to celebrate the Emersonian spirit of innovation and cultural independence.

— These competing narratives of early American literary history translate into numbers of pages and volume divisions in anthologies, as well as defining the parameters of survey courses. They also have the potential to shape scholarship at a deeper level.

The fresh and exciting perspective opened by *J19's* periodization risks an overemphasis on the nation, at the expense of powerful inter-, trans-, and nonnational elements, such as the evolution of the revolutionary era's recuperation of classical republicanism into a mode of republican thought that is self-consciously modern and cosmopolitan. Another new journal, *Literature in the Early American Republic: Annual Studies on Cooper and His Contemporaries*, reframes the period around a major author who is only now receiving full biographical treatment and the beginnings of a much-needed comprehensive reconsideration. Born with the Constitution in 1789 and dying in the year after the Compromise of 1850, Cooper provides an orientation to the literature of his period that cuts across many conceptual boundaries in American literary studies in potentially fruitful ways. His tremendous influence on the fiction of Honoré de Balzac and Joseph Conrad makes his work an important vector for the global impact of early American literature.

What about the Atlantic world and hemispheric paradigms that have become increasingly prominent challengers to the nationalist paradigm in early American literary studies? How do they sit with these competing periodizations? In *A New World of Words* (1994), William Spengemann made the provocative claim that early American literature should be understood to include writings in English that evince the effects of the Euro-American encounter, an imperative made practicable with Myra Jehlen and Michael Warner's anthology *The English Literatures of America, 1500–1800* (1997). By this measure, *Paradise Lost* is early American literature, as are many other works in the British canon. Spengemann advances his proposal in a compensatory spirit. What is the value of “early” American literature—literature chosen to fill the gaps in a curriculum, literature read mainly for the way it points forward to the greater achievements of “timely” American literature? Who would not

rather read the stately blank verse of *Paradise Lost* than the folkish prosody of *The Day of Doom*? Put this way, the choice seems obvious. The first version of Milton's great Christian epic appeared a mere five years after Wigglesworth's 1662 poem, yet in poetics it achieves a level of sophistication unmatched by the New England poet's use of common hymn meter.

Bouncing rhythms, end-stopped lines, and strong rhymes contributed to the immense popularity of *The Day of Doom* in New England. No copy of the first edition of the poem exists because copies were literally read to pieces, and many people committed Wigglesworth's lines to memory. The work was important to contemporary poets such as Edward Taylor, and its themes influenced later writers including Jonathan Edwards and Phillis Wheatley. Two centuries after *The Day of Doom*, Emily Dickinson's formal experiments with common hymn meter transformed Wigglesworthian fourteeners into something dramatically different. Our appreciation for Dickinson's aesthetic achievement is enhanced by an understanding of the tradition from which it sprang—and for this purpose Milton is no substitute. A better parallel for Wigglesworth than Milton might be John Bunyan, whose *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, 1684) profoundly shaped English prose. A rougher work than *Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim's Progress* continues to influence the narrative expectations of readers, including many who encounter it in one of the numerous redactions or simplified versions for children that remain popular. Like Bunyan, Wigglesworth created a work that engaged countless readers and that provided a model and a provocation to writers whose artistry surpassed his own.

The distinguished historian Bernard Bailyn, in his essay “Politics and the Creative Imagination” (2004), suggests a view of the aesthetic significance of early American literature that differs from Spengemann's. Bailyn argues that the innovations such as a written constitution that were introduced by

the American founders and that have now become commonplace around the world were enabled by the distance of the colonies from the metropole. Creativity often thrives on the margins. Bailyn draws for his argument on the work of the art critic Kenneth Clark, who makes a case for the liberating and enlivening effects that provincialism can have on the creative artist or intellectual. The metropolitan artist drinks straight from the well of cultural authority, but the best provincial artists have a freshness and simplicity that comes from sipping at the streams of experience. The provincial's commonsense perspective and interest in the ordinary facts of existence, sometimes infused with a visionary intensity, contrast positively with the overrefinement and scholasticism that can diminish the art of the metropole. In the words of an earlier aesthete of the provinces, the artist seeks an original relation to the universe, and it is easier to achieve this originality at the margins—on the peripheries of power.

A comparison of *Paradise Lost* with the religious poetry of Anne Bradstreet illuminates the contrast between the metropolitan poet and the provincial one. Milton announces in his opening lines his intention to update the tradition of Homer and Vergil by writing an English Christian epic; Bradstreet dwells on the divine as it is visible in the natural world for ten stanzas of "Contemplations" (1678) before turning to Genesis. Her poem highlights the effort involved in relating the scriptural creation tale to her surroundings and the psychology of maintaining an old faith in a radically new setting. The inward-looking and domestic aspects of Bradstreet's poetry have appealed to many modern poets and readers, including most famously Adrienne Rich, who find her work more relatable than that of her contemporaries—even such a great contemporary as John Milton.

As another approach to the question of how best to parse the field of early American literary history, consider turning Spenge-

mann's argument around: at what point does American literature offer writers of sufficient stature and distinctiveness to merit its own tradition? Jonathan Edwards would be a viable candidate if the only criteria were a substantial corpus of high-quality work and a wide and long-lasting influence. But Edwards's major genres, the sermon and the theological treatise, are peripheral to literary studies. The literary significance of Benjamin Franklin is difficult to separate from his political reputation. Susanna Rowson and Charles Brockden Brown were prolific contributors to a solidly literary genre, the novel, as well as producing other forms of literary and paraliterary writing. At present neither one has the name recognition of a Daniel Defoe, though their level of popular visibility is probably similar to that of Samuel Richardson and Frances Burney or Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. That could change. I have long contended that *Wieland* could be made into a riveting film (Tim Burton, are you paying attention? How about it, Quentin Tarantino?), and if Ismail Merchant and James Ivory or the Austenites are looking for fresh material, they would do well to consider *Charlotte Temple*. What other fictional heroine has a gravestone in Manhattan?

With Irving and Cooper we turn a corner in international visibility, though the alleged derivativeness of these writers has kept from them the status conferred on the next generation of American writers by Matthiessen. It has long been a mainstay of American literary history that while formal political ties between the United States and Great Britain ended in 1783, the two countries remained culturally close for many decades afterward. Matthiessen based his claims for the significance of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman on their literary merit and their engagement with the meaning of democracy, which he saw as a distinctively American contribution. In a recent study of Emerson, Lawrence Buell locates

Matthiessen's foundational figure in Victorian sage culture to demonstrate how this most independence-minded of mid-century American writers was shaped by the British literary tradition that he claimed to renounce. We can't really understand Emerson, Buell plausibly suggests, without understanding Thomas Carlyle, his friend and interlocutor and a great critic of American democracy.

So did the United States ever really achieve cultural independence? Recent studies suggest new dimensions to this question. Leonard Tennenhouse describes American literature as diasporic English literature in *The Importance of Feeling English* (2007). In *Anglophilia* (2008), Elisa Tamarkin makes a case that cultural ties between the United States and Great Britain were refreshed during the nineteenth century and had an especially deep impact in universities, where a genteel Anglocentrism permeated many departments. Her analysis is especially helpful for understanding the long hegemony exercised by the study of British literature in American higher education. In a different but complementary fashion, the book historians Meredith McGill and Trish Loughran each examine the intertwined literary worlds of Britain and the United States as social and material phenomena. They document American literary Anglophilia as an effect of copyright law, local printing practices, and the slow development of a national infrastructure in the United States. Even as the imperial center continued to hold cultural authority, however, the provinces exercised increasing sway. Not only the United States but also India, Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia produced English-language literatures that revitalized the literature of the metropole, transforming it into literatures in English.

English was only one of the literary languages of early America. Arguably the first "American" epic poem was written by Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, whose *Historia de la Nueva México* (1610) describes Juan de Oñate's conquest of New Mexico's indigenous peoples,

including the first Acoma Pueblo revolt and recapture in 1599. These events remain a source of conflict in the region, lending Villagrà's *Historia* ongoing relevance. Elsewhere colonial American writers dreamed of transforming linguistic multiplicity into a source of social and spiritual unity. As Patrick Erben discusses in *A Harmony of the Spirits: Translation and the Language of Community in Early Pennsylvania* (2012), Francis Daniel Pastorius wrote the title of his manuscript book "Bee-Hive" (c. 1696–1719) in seven languages (Greek, Latin, English, Dutch, German, Italian, and French) and followed it with a verse that opens, "In these Seven Languages I this my Book do own." Orature in indigenous languages adds dozens of tongues to the New World Babel that Cooper described. The anthologies *Early American Writings* (2001), edited by Carla Mulford and her collaborators, and *The Literatures of Colonial America* (2001), edited by Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer, offer classroom-ready multilingual approaches to the field.

Of the European languages in the Americas, Spanish most fully integrates the products of its provincial artists in its literature. This may be because, as Barbara Fuchs observes in "Golden Ages and Golden Hinds; or, Periodizing Spain and England," early modern Spanish literature is backward-looking, focused on a lost golden age, while during the same period English literature is aggressively forward-looking and expansive. Fuchs argues for the transnational framing of literary periods and notes that "the twinning of military and literary activities as hallmarks of Elizabethan greatness" extended into the twentieth century (325). From Shakespeare's day until the middle of the twentieth century, English literary achievement was linked to imperial expansion. Meanwhile, the lost golden age of Spanish power became a reality after the defeat of the Armada, and provincial artists were less threatening to a metropolitan society whose cultural hegemony was already much

diminished. Paul Giles has recently proposed that early Americanists draw on the aesthetic concept of the baroque as a way to reframe British North American writers such as Cotton Mather, who have typically been considered protonationalists, and to relate them instead to their southern counterparts. The characteristic pessimism of late-seventeenth-century colonial Puritan writers fretting over the alleged declension in their communities and over mounting British control suggests a fruitful comparison with similar themes in the literature of Spain and its colonies.

By this time it should be amply apparent that I have no answer for the “right” date that could divide early from later American literature. Each time frame I examine here generates an engaging and important narrative (the emergence of the nation, the rise of democracy and the novel, the shift from transatlantic to continental perspectives, and the belated achievement of cultural independence). Each one highlights some literary movements, authors, and works while diminishing others. Each carries with it opportunities for treating American literary history in relation to methodologies that cut across the narrative of a national literary tradition, including Atlantic-world, hemispheric, multilingual, and postcolonial approaches. The variety of fresh perspectives on this fertile period that have opened up in recent years makes it an especially stimulating area for scholarship and teaching. Viva the provinces!

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