

Post Transbellum?



What might a post-transbellum moment in American literary studies look like?

With this question, and the multiple, even contradictory temporal designations it contains, I mean not to raise doubts about the keyword at the heart of Cody Marrs's wonderfully argued and beautifully written *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*. Nor do I want to call (already) for a conclusion to the provocations about periodization, literary history, and the legacy of internecine conflict that this study offers teachers and students of the nineteenth-century United States. To the contrary: in keeping with Marrs's claim that the Civil War "continued to unfold long after 1865," and perhaps "is still unfolding," I want to ask how we—"the latter-day heirs of this struggle"—might respond to *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*. What are the possibilities that the book's projects make available, and what might we do with them? Which is to ask: what happens if we pair "post" and "transbellum"?

Of course, there is a sense in which this very question disregards one of the central theses of Marrs's monograph: his claim that the Civil War must be read as a "multilinear upheaval," and that if we study the literary careers of writers such as Whitman and Dickinson with this frame in mind, "categories" like "antebellum" and "postbellum" both "crystallize and dissolve, yielding a literature that crosses through the conflict and far beyond it." Here, Marrs makes a compelling case for rejecting the received designations for studying the nineteenth century; as he goes on to assert, the literature that forms the archive of his book "can only be called transbellum." This is a crucial claim, and one that I fully accept.

But I am also interested in the way that Marrs formulates the "ante" and "post" here as obtaining dialectically (to deploy a term from his chapter on Whitman) *in* the "trans." That is, if reading across the divide of 1865—or, better, "against 1865," as Marrs and Christopher Hager put it in their productively polemical *J19* essay—we realize that even as markers like "antebellum" and "postbellum" fade away, they also, importantly, solidify and clarify. Their functions come into relief.

In other words, in rejecting the standard periodization of nineteenth-century American literature that turns on ideas of ante and post, before and after, we might come to recognize not just the limitations of such prefixes but also their generative possibilities. It's as if, in casting them away, Marrs allows us to see what these orthodox and somewhat staid labels might do if understood in a richer, more robust conceptual framework in which the Civil War does not end in 1865, and where "time" does not only signify movement along a "straight line."

This insight is incisive and—to make my intellectual commitments explicit—much needed. Indeed, as someone whose own forthcoming book, *Untimely Democracy*, seeks to bring attention to the neglected literature of the post-Reconstruction epoch, I worry about the way the designation "nineteenth century" comes to stand primarily, even sometimes exclusively, for the "antebellum era." My concern is less about coverage than about the values implicit in the practice.

Letting “antebellum” and “nineteenth century” function as synonyms seems to me to imply that the aftermath of the Civil War and the period following the collapse of Reconstruction are somehow less instructive or illuminating for exploring questions of aesthetic experimentation and political activism than is the run-up to these events.

Marrs offers us a concise institutional history that explains this state of affairs. Pointing us first to the etymology of “antebellum” and “postbellum” within the field of “international law,” where they served to regulate claims of property and land transfer in the context of martial conflict, Marrs goes on to assert that the terms accordingly promoted “fictions of erasure that enabled both sides to pretend either that the war had never really happened, or that history began anew with its completion.” When “antebellum” was deployed after the Civil War in the American context, Marrs writes, it tended to “describe something that was both Southern and outmoded.”

It was not until the twentieth century and the founding of American literature as a field of study in the Cold War era that “the concept of a *national* antebellum literature” emerged. Indeed, as Marrs demonstrates in perhaps the most provocative portion of this meditation, “antebellum” gained traction as a result of the New Americanist critique of the narrow canon promulgated by F. O. Matthiessen and the other founders of the field. As Marrs puts it, “the New Americanists effectively replaced an authorial canon with a periodic canon, encapsulated by the terms ‘antebellum’ and ‘postbellum.’”

The legacy of this backstory is important, for it forms the present of our critical moment—and should bear on any prognostications about the “post.” Focusing on questions of race, gender, and sexuality, and troubling the consensus about what counts as a “text” worth reading, the New Americanists enlarged literary studies, making the field reflect the “devotion to the possibilities of democracy” that Matthiessen claimed as his Renaissance’s defining feature. Still, this critical movement has left unexplored the way that assumptions about periodization (and more broadly, temporality) inflect what are now its orthodox organizing rubrics and conceptual frames.

As an example, consider the books explicitly concerned with the nineteenth century published in the Duke University Press New Americanists series, where much of the most exciting and transformative work of this approach appeared. Among these titles, the period before 1865 holds a decisive influence, with the latter half of the epoch represented primarily in closing chapters. Whereas the transnational turn has been acknowledged as the necessary response to one of the limitations of the New Americanist paradigm and its retention of the nation-state as analytic unit, Marrs entreats us to consider whether “there are temporal as well as spatial borderlands” to which we must attend.

This question holds special force for African American writers working after the Civil War, in the era that Charles W. Chesnutt called the “postbellum, pre-Harlem” moment. Chesnutt created this designation to explain the neglect

suffered by turn-of-the-twentieth-century authors like himself, whose project was problematically overshadowed by Harlem Renaissance luminaries. But it is worth asking, with Marrs, what “transbellum” might do for “postbellum, pre-Harlem.”

Marrs points us in this direction in his coda on “Other Nineteenth Centuries,” where he reflects on what it would mean to read Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s 1892 *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted* not as “a historical novel” about “passing and racial uplift”—familiar topics of the epoch’s literature—but rather as a “counterhistorical novel that pivots on emancipation’s *longue durée*.” I am not sure what to make of the opposition of “historical” and “counterhistorical” in this instance. Harper’s novel, with its commitment to racial progress, on the one hand, and to a vision of bondage as an intergenerational harm, on the other, seems better accounted for as a profound engagement with the “multilinear” history that Marrs explores in earlier pages. But it seems to me perfectly right that *Iola Leroy* is about the long—and hardly temporally progressive—afterlife of slavery. Indeed, the template that Marrs offers here for reading black writers working *after* the Civil War but still preoccupied by its unfulfilled promises and unfinished projects stands as one of the signal insights and implications of *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*.

I want to conclude with an example of one such implication: the case—or let’s say, the “career”—of Callie House. Born a slave in Rutherford County, Tennessee, in 1861, House was a child of the Civil War in more ways than one. As the historian Mary Frances Berry has suggested, House’s father probably fought for the Union Army, and the march of Grant’s soldiers through Tennessee would have constituted for her a sort of political primal scene.

But House’s most profound relationship to the war came after its ostensible conclusion, in the era that Rayford Logan has called the “nadir” of racial history. After the promises of Sherman’s Field Order No. 15 had faded away and the commitment to racial justice embodied institutionally by the Freedmen’s Bureau had been abandoned, Callie House continued to fight the war in her own way. She became a leader of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association of the United States of America (MRB&PA), an organization that built a campaign to redress slavery, taking the Union soldier pension program as its model. “We are organizing our selves together as a race of people who feels that they have been wronged,” she announced in 1899.

Though we might immediately note an affinity between Harper and House, I want to pursue another pairing made possible through Marrs’s powerful concept of the “career.” As Marrs defines them, literary “careers bridge the historical and the transhistorical, unfolding in ways that disclose the influence of particular events on given works and, at the same time, the broader imaginative connections with which those works are bound up.” Accordingly, “Careers ... enable us to read multilinearly across eras and genres that are often kept quite separate from one another, and this perspective is utterly crucial when

it comes to the Civil War.”

I would add that this multilinear perspective is utterly crucial when it comes to figures like House. For House’s organization pursued emancipation long after the war by asserting the right of slaves to seek reparation—and by using the very language that slaves deployed *before* the war. As she put it in a September 1899 letter, the MRB&PA’s objective is to get the government to “pay us...an indemnity for the work we and our fore parents was rob of from the Declaration of Independence down to the Emancipation of four + half million slaves who was turn loose ignorant, bare footed, and naked, without a dollar in their pockets, without a shelter to go under out of the falling rain.”

With Marrs’s sense of the “career” in mind, we can recognize House as literary kin not only to Harper but also to Dickinson. Consider the way both writers worked in forms that have made their output difficult to place within the institutional structures of literary study, which privilege published texts. In fact, we might take what Marrs says of Dickinson to illuminate House, for she, too, “reimagined the conflict ... by creating alternative worlds and timescapes, many of which extend ... far beyond the war’s chronological end-points.” That we can use Marrs’s account of one of the most canonical writers of the nineteenth century to begin to understand the career of Callie House stands as perhaps the greatest index of the contribution this study makes.

And in this way, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* points to a project for American literary studies post the New Americanists. For one of the reasons that House is largely unknown is that the whole of her writing is a continuation of the Civil War—that absent cause, supposedly the “defining event of the nineteenth century” that is “deemphasized by the periodizing practices that are specifically designed to acknowledge its impact.” In forcing us to focus on the “transbellum,” and in unsettling the ante/post divide, Marrs paradoxically offers us an occasion to better understand the post. That is, he invites us to attend to those authors and activists working after the war that perhaps never ended, and he gives us a way to account for their projects, which are inextricable from that conflict and its sources.

Or, more simply put: *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* offers an occasion to consider the careers of Callie House and many others whose names we still do not know.

Further Reading

For a companion piece to *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*, especially its arguments about periodization, see Cody Marrs and Christopher Hager, “Against 1865: Reperiodizing the Nineteenth Century,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1:2 (2013): 259-84. For the quote from F. O. Matthiessen, see his landmark *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941; repr., New York, 1968), ix.

The complete list of titles in Duke University Press's New Americanist series, edited by Donald Pease, is available [here](#). Russ Castronovo's contribution, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, N.C., 2001), represents an important exception to the trend I describe, not simply for its attention to the post-Civil War moment and its more general emphasis on the boundaries between life and death—which in some ways anticipates the temporal turn—but also for its practice of placing literature within political and cultural contexts without also reducing the work of the former to the work of the latter. For a trenchant critique of the New Americanist paradigm, with a specific focus on the movement's approach to identity and representation, see Johannes Voelz, *Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists and Emerson's Challenge* (Hanover, N.H., 2010). Voelz's book inaugurated Pease's post-New Americanist series, "Re-Mapping the Transnational." For Charles W. Chesnutt's pronouncement, see his "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem," in *Stories, Novels, and Essays*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York, 2002), 906-12. Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard deploy this designation in their crucial edited volume *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919* (New York, 2006). On Callie House, see Mary Frances Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York, 2005) and my *Untimely Democracy: The Politics of Progress after Slavery* (New York, 2017). "Nadir" comes from Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York, 1954). The quoted passages from House's writings appear in Callie House to Harrison Barrett, Acting Assistant Attorney General of the Post Office Department, September 29, 1899, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 28, Records of the Post Office Department, Office of the Postmaster General, Office of the Solicitor, "Fraud Order" Case Files, 1894-1951, File 1321.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.1 (Fall, 2016).

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