

Reconstruction at 150: Protecting the Right to Vote

abstracts

Friday, November 5

Goliath and David: 19C Periodicals and Reconstructing Freedom (10:15-11:45)

Jane E. Schultz (chair)

Constructing Celebrity: American Privacy and Transatlantic Scandal in *Lady Byron Vindicated*

This paper concentrates on the scandal and fallout following Harriet Beecher Stowe's publication of "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life" in 1869 (expanded and published in book form the next year as *Lady Byron Vindicated*). Stowe was the first to publish openly and widely the rumor that Lord Byron had had an incestuous affair with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, and Lady Byron had discovered it. As I argue in this paper, Stowe gambled on the moral work of privacy: that a secret crime so appalling desacralizes the private sphere and outing it will expose the villain and exonerate the innocent—that is, she imagined this would unfold like the plot of a nineteenth-century novel. If Stowe had sought to shield Lady Byron and stop young readers from falling for Lord Byron's seductions, as Susan Ryan points out, she "miscalculated on both counts." The transatlantic uproar over the exposé was immediate, sparking an intense debate over literary value, authorship, and morality. This paper examines the terms by which that debate was waged—evidence, propriety, morality, authenticity, and aesthetics—to show how they make apparent how privacy consolidated into what I call a "secular sensibility," and the ways that consolidation brought potentially incompatible, combustible aspects of life together, creating in the process, to quote Saba Mahmood, an "explosive symbiosis" between religion and private life in secularism.

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The Paris Commune and the Labor of Reconstruction

This paper explores the coverage of the Paris Commune in Frederick Douglass's *New National Era* newspaper. In particular, I examine the relationship between the paper's commentary on that European uprising, one explicitly driven by concerns of class and labor, and its simultaneous coverage of labor issues in the United States during Reconstruction. While broadly sympathetic to the concerns of workers, the newspaper was deeply skeptical of organized labor, and this skepticism was reflected in its largely negative coverage of the Commune. I explore how this coverage of international events was filtered through the local, and indeed deeply personal, concerns of the paper's staff members. For at the same time that the paper ran editorials on and reports of events in Paris, its pages were filled with accounts of how the Typographical Union had refused to admit Frederick Douglass's son (and the printer of the *New National Era*) Lewis Douglass on account of his race. Through this episode, I work to tease out how local, national, and international events came together in the newspaper's approach to issues of labor during Reconstruction.

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“We Have No Angels Here”: Counterfactual Confederate Citizenship in Woolson’s “Rodman the Keeper”

Just as Reconstruction era courts and Congress attempted to define national citizenship in their recently reuniting and expanding United States, authors of the period grappled with its undecided, malleable nature. Alongside law, Reconstruction literature also theorized citizenship, often by using the counterfactual imaginary. These dislocating, retrospective, nostalgic, or even utopian moments worked to represent the contingency of the moment regarding the boundaries of nationality and belonging.

In her short story “Rodman the Keeper,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1877, Constance Fenimore Woolson employs the counterfactual to explore the ambiguities of Confederate citizenship and the possibilities of repair in the face of the irreparable. Much like the Confederate literature Coleman Hutchison’s scholarship illuminates, Woolson’s Reconstruction text intervenes in the ideological struggle over cultural memory and reveals the connections between nationalism and the literary. Specifically, in “Rodman” Woolson grapples with the benefits and pitfalls of readmitting former Confederates to full citizenship. She mirrors the language of the recently ratified Fourteenth Amendment in ways that theorize citizenship more capaciously than the amendment itself. Her text explores a more broadly conceived citizenry, one both afforded and refused in the narrative, predicated on establishing a national collective memory. With its use of the counterfactual, “Rodman” asserts that any new, aspirational forms of national belonging that emerge in Reconstruction must begin by attending to memorialization.

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Postbellum Developments (2:15-3:45)

Andrew Kopec (chair)

D.C.’s *New Era* and Black Washington

During 1870, the single year in which the District of Columbia’s *New Era* circulated Civil War stories and recollective anecdotes, the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified and adopted, thereby securing voting rights for Black men. Founded on the cusp of such momentous change, the city’s premier Black weekly was committed to “Liberty” and “Enterprise” as early as its initial masthead, and yet its Civil War stories offered two strikingly different ways of imagining a political future for African Americans. “Clar’s Choice: A Word to the Freedwomen” (March 24, 1870) reveals the *New Era*’s early regard for domestic responsibilities and respectability, a human dignity that could be earned and a political lesson that could be taught. By contrast, “The

Mutiny. A Story of the War of the Rebellion” (August 11, 1870) probes the long-standing U.S. declaration that all men are created equal, even in the least likely setting: an army camp where rank and authority were as indisputable as the forts, regiments, and contraband camps that came to define wartime Washington. This paper seeks to explain why both stories found their place in a periodical that meant to report and shape the social revolution underway, as well as the alternative editorial agendas and methods that would lend a surprisingly urban definition to inchoate freedoms, particularly as two different editors arrived in the District and chose where to live. The residences of Martin and Douglass suggest both gendered politics and their differing genealogies, as the weekly’s readers began to find their postwar footing and the parameters of what freedom might mean to voting citizens started to emerge.

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“Sovereignty and Secularism in the U.S.-Canada Borderlands; or, Louis Riel’s Letters to Ulysses S. Grant.”

My focus will fall on the letters that Louis Riel wrote to Ulysses S. Grant during the former’s exile in the U.S., between the Red River Rebellion (1869-1870) and the North-West Rebellion (1885). Riel wrote a pair of lengthy letters to Grant, one in 1870 and another in 1875; in those letters, he sketched the history of the Métis people’s antagonistic relationship to the Canadian government, gestured towards the Métis nation-state he wished to found, and solicited US help in founding that polity. Grant, to be sure, never proffered any such assistance, but the letters nonetheless offer a glimpse of Riel’s strikingly heterodox political thought and of the way it developed in relation to the politics of the U.S. in the Reconstruction era. Riel resists incorporation into the Canadian nation-state by constructing, in his writing and activism, a mode of political authority that refuses the secularization of conventional Euro-American political sovereignty. Notably, Riel was drawn to correspond with Grant and other Republican politicians because, in the wake of the Civil War, he saw their party as the ally of oppressed peoples; my analysis of his letters will thus help us see how those hailing from beyond our borders appraised U.S. Reconstruction and help us appreciate some of the promises and perils of refusing secularization in nineteenth-century North America. As for a working title, I’ll go with this for now: “Sovereignty and Secularism in the US-Canada Borderlands; or, Louis Riel’s Letters to Ulysses S. Grant.”

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“Practically No Limit to the Quantity”: Fish, Oil, and the Extractive Zone of Alaska

Contributing to a larger project on the entwined histories of US empire, animal food systems, and mass extinction, this paper considers Atlantic and Pacific salmon across four centuries of

colonization, resource extraction, and industrialization in the United States. Like the cod, the salmon has gone from abundance to extinction in New England's waters, and the only commercial fisheries in the US today are along the northwest Pacific coast. While salmon were and remain integral to indigenous economies and food systems, the species has now largely been captured by global systems of production and consumption that have radically disrupted the biosphere at both local and planetary levels. That capture really began with the expansion of US empire and its attendant extractive enterprises in the period following the Civil War. This paper will draw on historical and literary accounts of the development of Alaskan fisheries and industrial canneries in the decades between the end of the war and the Yukon gold rush of the 1890s, reading it as part of the larger development of Alaska as both an extractive zone for animal and mineral resources, and a symbolic resource for emergent forms of environmental writing and ecological nationalism.

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Reconstructing Collectivity: Reading Postwar Audiences (4:00-5:30)

Justine S. Murison (chair)

“We Are All Bound Up Together”: African American Visual Culture and Constructions of Identity and Citizenship

In this presentation, I will present a rhetorical analysis of visual images centered on African Americans during the period from 1863 to 1880. These images, in which African Americans were engaged, were intended to construct a sense of collective consciousness among newly emancipated African Americans and free blacks in the North and South, as well as to counter visual images presented in popular publications situating emancipation and Reconstruction as threats. I argue that these strategically cultivated images responded to the exigencies of a time in which visual discourses of white victimhood were rhetorically powerful modes of resistance to black freedom.

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Audiences After Reconstruction: Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins's “Peculiar Sam” in the Midwest

Following the lead of scholars of nineteenth-century Black women writers, I view Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins's “Peculiar Sam: or, the Underground Railroad” as radical work that directly challenges practices of African American representation on stage. But what can we know about the work the play did in its original performative context? And how does the wider availability of digitized newspaper resources aid or color efforts to recover histories of performance? Hopkins's musical play, then called “The Underground Railroad,” was performed in 1879 in dozens of towns and cities in the midwestern states including Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa,

Kansas, and Nebraska. The play featured an all-Black cast including well-known actor Sam Lucas in the lead role. In order to learn more about what the play's political work was in its original context, I piece together reviews and advertisements printed in newspapers to establish the dates and locations of the performances. From this we can learn something about who attended the play and what the various audiences took the play to be. I analyze reviews from white-owned as well as from Black-owned newspapers, and I seek to understand what it means for a play about Black social and geographic mobility to be performed in Midwestern spaces immediately after the Reconstruction era. The talk concludes with a consideration of the ways archival presences and absences shape our attempts to recover histories of performance.

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“The Real War Will Never Get on the Xbox: Replaying the US Civil War”

Walt Whitman's oft-quoted assertion that “The real war will never get in the books” maintained that both the violence and the mundane minutiae of the conflict would elude representation. Numerous writers and critics have examined and challenged the poet's claim, including, of course, Whitman himself. In the process, questions about what constitutes “the real war” and how language signifies it have predominated, and critics have extended their analysis to include representations of the Civil War in photographs and film.

While these continue to be important lines of inquiry, little has been said about the latest form of visual and narrative depictions of the Civil War—those appearing in computer and console video games. Given the rise in games' sophistication and popularity, they may now be one of the most common ways the public encounters narratives of the US Civil War.

In this paper, I examine some prominent examples of US Civil War video games, bearing in mind the distinction Whitman saw between “the surface-courteousness of the Generals...the few great battles” and “the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors.” Moreover, I consider how “replaying” the Civil War sheds new light on Whitman's repeated, if less quoted, assertion that perhaps the “real war” *should not* be written, and why the poet was so wary of seeing “the actual soldier of 1862-‘65” brought to life on the printed—or now pixelated—page.

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Saturday, November 6

The Poetry of Civil War and Its Legacies (8:30-10:00)

Benjamin Fagan (chair)

James Russell Lowell's "The Present Crisis" and the January 6 Insurrection

At the opening of President Trump's second impeachment trial, Senate Chaplain Barry Black's brief prayer offered the jurors guidance in the form of a two-line quotation from James Russell Lowell's 1845 poem, "The Present Crisis." Although the Rev. Black writes all his prayers as deliberately nonpartisan, this quotation could not help but invoke a history of progressive activism. Written in angry response to the annexation of Texas and the consequent extension of slave power in Congress, the poem was taken up as an abolitionist anthem and subsequently in causes including women's suffrage, African American uplift, opposition to British rule in Ireland and India, and the Civil Rights movement, becoming a favorite of Martin Luther King, Jr. The poem circulated in these contexts by means of excerpts—a little-studied literary genre which this paper will begin to theorize. The poem was also transformed into a hymn, "Once to every man and nation," in the late nineteenth century. Although ostensibly nonpartisan, the hymn also became associated with progressive causes, including King's protest of the Vietnam War. Whether the Rev. Black came to "The Present Crisis" by way of the hymn, King's speeches, a collection of Lowell's poetry, or any number of other sources, his use of an excerpt to open the impeachment trial indicates a substantial history of circulation outside the academy. This history cuts against the ostensibly progressive de-canonization of the Schoolroom Poets and Lowell in particular, who has been excised from the major anthologies of American literature beginning with the Heath in 1990.

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The Loss of Longfellow during the Civil War

Scholars such as Christoph Irmscher, Angela Sorby, and Jill Lepore have shown that despite his pacifism, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow embedded in his two major projects during the Civil War plenty of commentary on the conflict. It was the sympathetic guidance that Longfellow's readers had been listening for intently from the poet of national fellow-feeling since the outbreak of war. Why, then, didn't they hear it?

The answer, I suggest, has to do with the barriers that the Civil War seemed to erect between America's foremost sentimentalist and his readers. The antebellum Longfellow had cultivated in his readership a fantasy of transparency, his own family adopted by the entire nation. But during the war Northerners and Southerners constructed Longfellow in periodicals as a private poet consumed by grief. He mourned the loss of his wife Fanny in the first year of the war and later tended to his son Charley, who was wounded gravely in combat for the Union. Finding no mourning in his poetry, his readers assumed that the poet who had been a figure of universality now responded to loss by turning inward. Longfellow's true voice was silenced, they thought,

and unable to offer consolation for the enormous losses brought on by the conflict. Even as Longfellow wrote about the war, his readers refused to hear him. Instead, they clung to his antebellum verse to transform him into a peaceful, if innocuous, figure of nostalgia and a relic of a consensual past as unrecoverable as sentimental transparency itself.

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Reconstructing Whitman's Reconstructive Impulse

Over two tumultuous decades, from the heightened civil strife of the late antebellum years through the Reconstruction era, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* underwent significant expansions and redactions across numerous editions. Historically informed literary criticism has become highly attuned to the political connections and implications of even minor formal adjustments to Whitman's masterwork. Yet through all Whitman's alterations, *Leaves of Grass* maintained a prophetic vision of an American nation reconstructed around a more egalitarian core than the current political system supported. Indeed, the book consistently presented itself as a central component of the more democratic version of the United States that Whitman sought to articulate and enact. As the postbellum challenges of federal Reconstruction became central to national politics, Whitman attempted to leverage the reconstructive impulse behind *Leaves of Grass*, which gained a more concrete relevance as he adopted the persona of the Good Gray Poet. This paper examines one key aspect of Whitman's ongoing reconstructive strategy by focusing on several commemorative scenes staged in multiple editions. It shows how Whitman designed each of these commemorations to address the basic temporal paradox of reconstruction: the need to reinvent the nation even while recalling its origins.

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"A Strange, Enormous, Terrible Flower": *Stasis* and the Nature of War in Lanier and Timrod

Confederate poets Sidney Lanier and Henry Timrod had first-hand experience of the unthinkable carnage of the Civil War, and both attempted to make sense of that experience, and the bitterness of Southern defeat, through the idea that civil war is intrinsic to (human) nature. Far from being a truism, this idea had significant philosophical roots that modern political theory repressed but that Timrod and Lanier's literary evocations recuperate. Drawing from the work of Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and Nicole Loraux on the Greek concept of civil war (*stasis*), where a wrenching conflict that begins in the domestic, familial, and natural domain extends to the polis but without being overcome there, this paper will explore how Timrod and Lanier's elegiac pastorals grapple with the mutations that civil war introduces into the oppositions between home and city, nature and culture, and life and death. With the concept of *stasis*, the idea of life-as-war commonly associated with literary naturalism appears as well in the Southern pastoral, imbuing

beautiful landscapes with a revanchist, monumental inflection that parallels the revisionist historicism of the Lost Cause.

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Manifestations of Amputation (10:15-11:45)

Kathleen Diffley (chair)

Evaluating the Rhetorical Work of “the Sick and Wounded” in Wartime Usage

The institutionalization of relief work during the Civil War, visible in units like the Army Medical Department, the Union Surgeon General's Office, and the Army Nursing Superintendent's Office, created a diction of bureaucracy that provides insight into 19th-century cultural assumptions about public health and medicine. I consider the rhetorical meaning of the oft-used phrase "the sick and wounded," which by 1862 was being written in shorthand as "the S&W" and used in the press to leverage public support for sanitary measures. The shorthand reveals a military world that conflated the conditions of illness and grievous injury. Though the phrase was a bureaucratic convenience, my paper unpacks the unintended consequences of its usage in historical documents by health practitioners, military administrators, and civilians.

In short, the conflation of the sick with the wounded ran roughshod over the significant distinctions between these two states of military debility. Sick soldiers received little public honor for enduring the bodily ravages of typhoid, malaria, and dysentery, whereas soldiers recuperating from battle wounds were held in high esteem, as scholars of Civil War disability have lately observed. Wounds were signifiers of heroism, which did not diminish the masculinity of or public reverence for the soldier/patient. Sickness, however, was read as constitutional weakness, even feminizing; worse still, long-term illness invited the possibility that the soldier was malingering.

I examine how and why the phrase came into wartime parlance, who used it, and for what rhetorical purpose. Surgeons used the phrase as a bureaucratic tool to organize treatment and move supplies. Care workers, on the other hand, were reluctant to distinguish between forms of suffering. For them, sicknesses were just as onerous as wounds, requiring even more courage and stoicism than that ascribed to fallen men on the field. Anxious civilians received news of "the S&W" in newspapers but arrived at little consensus about how to interpret the phrase, other than in holding the Union government morally responsible for keeping families apprised of soldiers' welfare. Finally, the efficacy of the phrase suggests how the rhetorical linking of divergent bodily states shrouded the realities of wartime suffering as a matter of convenience.

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“Such men are remembered by me”: The Print Culture Post-War Lives of the Left-Armed Corps

In August 1865, Ora D. Walbridge sat down with pen in left hand to produce a specimen of his best business penmanship. Three years earlier, a gunshot had left Walbridge’s right arm paralyzed. When he submitted his penmanship specimen, he joined a unique group of Civil War veterans: the self-proclaimed “Left-Armed Corps.” Scholars have mined the contest submissions for insights into the lived experiences of wounded and disabled men during and shortly after the war. This paper, however, examines the veterans’ lives in the decades following the conflict, primarily as they are documented in print culture, to highlight the lasting resonance of missing limbs in the face of national reconciliation. Former contestants who sought political office ran on the so-called “crippled soldier” ticket, ostensibly bearing physical proof of their loyalty and competence. Obituaries for members of the Left-Armed Corps regularly mentioned their absent right arms, centering the men’s upstanding citizenship and worth on their sacrificed or mangled appendages. Also drawing on demographical and biographical information compiled while editing what will be the first published collection of the left-handed writings, this paper provides insights into how the veterans’ lives were shaped by their service and their wounds. Many carried the memory of and their association with the Left-Armed Corps into the twentieth century. “Such men are remembered by me,” Walbridge wrote, “I, for one, always extend the only hand I have left to greet such men.”

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“Fighting Has Been No Child’s Play for Him”: Amputation, Loss, and Racial Difference in Anna Dickinson's *What Answer?*

Anna Dickinson, a wildly popular orator for women’s rights and the abolition of slavery, wrote her first novel, *What Answer?*, in 1868 as a way to grapple with the issues of loss and racial justice. The two major male characters in the novel both lose limbs fighting for the Union: *What Answer?*’s brief is to argue for black civic and political equality and to link the massive losses of the war, both on the battlefield and closer to home, as the predicate for that equality. The novel complicates this calculus, however, since one of the characters, Will Surrey, is the white scion of a prominent New York family, and the other, Robert Ercildoune, the light-skinned son of a wealthy Black businessman. In this paper, I explore how Dickinson uses amputation as a trope to work through what it is that white citizens owe Black Americans, both enslaved and free.

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Texts Forgotten and Forsaken: Civil War & Reconstruction Pedagogy (2:15-3:15)

Gregory Laski (chair)

“The Price Ought to Be Paid’: War, Slavery, and Reparations in *Waiting for the Verdict* (1868)”

Racial passing, lost sons and daughters, and radical abolitionist politics

Sarah E. Chinn, Hunter College, CUNY, sarah.chinn@hunter.cuny.edu

Louis Riel’s “Dans l’État du Minnesota”: Unsettling the Prairies in the 1870s

Exiled in the U.S., a Métis leader plots against Canada

Timothy Donahue, Oakland University, tdonahue@oakland.edu

**“Re-reading Reconstruction: Frances Harper’s *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869) and Sherwood
Bonner’s ‘A Volcanic Interlude’ (1880)”**

Miscegenation mysteries solved but attitudes toward racial identity left unresolved

Katie McKee, University of Mississippi, kmckee@olemiss.edu

From Civil War to Culture War: A Public Humanities Workshop (3:30-5:30)

Julia Stern (chair)

When insurgents stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, the Associated Press, CNN, and ABC News all called it “unprecedented.” Was it? Those who study the past know that the divides in the United States at present — divides fueled by racism and white supremacy, class conflict and poverty, educational gaps and geographical differences — run deep in the roots of this nation.

So how can scholars of the nineteenth century speak to twenty-first-century public needs? What kind of projects make clear to public audiences the exigency of the past? This workshop takes up those questions. As scholars of the nineteenth century engaged in public-facing work, the panelists will describe their projects and key points from their experiences: what they learned, how they measure the impact of their work, whose theories or principles inform their approach, and/or how their publicly engaged work has enriched their understanding of their fields. The workshop has two objectives: first, to underscore dialogues between Civil War-era scholarship and present-day concerns and, second, to circulate ideas and practical takeaways for doing public-facing work.

Chris Hedlin, Leading Edge Fellow/American Council of Learned Societies and Religion
Reporter at PublicSource

Jamie Jones, Consultant at Mystic Seaport and Nantucket Whaling Museums

Denise G. Burgher, Senior Team Leader, Colored Conventions Project

Emily Donaldson Field, Co-Principal Investigator, Remembering Bridgewater’s Native and
African American Residents

Allison M. Johnson, Organizer and Host of Library of Congress-sponsored “transcribathon”

Michael LeMahieu, Reclaim&Rename