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Introduction: On Literature

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Abstract

Literature and history as objects of study and fields of inquiry have shaped each other in profound if asymmetrical ways. This introduction provides a brief account of how these disciplines intersect in the GAPE and the contemporary era, emphasizing concerns with expertise and amateurism that also emerge in many of the articles in this special issue. Those concerns, in turn, relate to what the articles show are literature's pedagical functions in the GAPE and the present moment and within and beyond the classroom. As it argues, literature's pedagogical dimensions challenge distinctions between teaching, research, and activism in the context of current debates about if and how historical and literary study should be presentist and politically committed.

Keywords: literature; disciplinary; interdisciplinary; expertise; presentism

Literature and history as objects of study and fields of inquiry have shaped each other in profound if asymmetrical ways. In literary studies, debates about if and how to draw on "history"—meaning historical sources, historical scholarship, historical methods, and a focus on change over time—have been a crucial if periodic feature of the field for over a century. Shifting views about the relationship between literature and history were key to the emergence of literary studies as a discipline in U.S. and British research universities during and after the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. In the late nineteenth century, the professionalization of literary studies shifted from philology toward literary history, which involves the study and organization of literature into temporal periods with a concomitant interest in identifying what characterizes a given moment and in tracking change over time. This analysis could include a focus on literature's relationship to social and cultural history.[1] By the 1930s, however, so called "New Critics" sought to establish a distinctive method and object for literary study by insisting that literary works should be analyzed without reference to historical information such as biographical details about the author. In practice, New Criticism did not maintain such a strict boundary between text and context, but it gave rise to a long-standing (if, again, contested) distinction between so-called "formalist" and "historicist" approaches to literature—the former

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focusing primarily on questions of style and genre and the latter on how literature has shaped and been shaped by aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic history.

Literature has not played as obvious a role in the development of history as a field of study. But the emergence of history as a professional academic discipline in the United States during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era involved a shift in whether and how historians used literature in their scholarship. Before the late nineteenth century, professional historians might draw on respected works of literature as evidence of a given zeitgeist, but this approach dropped away as progressive historians established the archive and the accumulation of empirical evidence as the proper, professional academic basis for their work.[2] One way to conceive that change in historical scholarship was as a distinction *between* history and literature, with the latter associated with a "distortion of the truth" due to its emphasis on style and artistry.[3] John Higham notes that "an emphatic differentiation between history and literature fortified the profession[al] [historians'] sense of superiority toward a 'horde of amateurs.'"[4] That differentiation has not remained uninterrogated. Hayden White famously argued that, as a form of narrative prose, history was essentially literary, shaped by rhetorical effects such as metaphor and metonymy as well as genres including romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire.[5] By the time White offered that analysis, the rise of interdisciplinary fields like American Studies and Black Studies, which drew from and critiqued history and literary studies, were interrogating and refusing the prevailing terms of and distinctions between those disciplines. Nevertheless, current debates in the field of history about "presentism" echo aspects of older conversations about objectivity, empiricism, archives, ethics, and politics in historiography, even if they do not explicitly refer to literature. Moreover, these recent conversations expose the gendered and racialized dimensions of efforts to eschew qualities associated with literature and amateurism.[6]

Three of the articles in this special issue are written by scholars of literature and two by historians, and the issue is coedited by a historian and a literary scholar. Since *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* appeals primarily to historians, however, this introduction is provided by the scholar of literature and furnishes some context on the state of literary studies, as that field may be less familiar to most of the journal's readers. Yet concerns with classed, gendered, and racialized concepts and practices of amateurism and expertise in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (GAPE) cut across the articles in this special issue. These include amateur self-published child-authors (Brian Rouleau), white-settler colonial conceptions of expertise and authority (Sarah Ruffing Robbins), depictions of the development of the "professional" writer and debates about whether working-class experiences were the only legitimate bases of Marxist art and activism (Nathaniel Cadle), as well as representations of women journalists navigating challenges to their expertise and authority (Hunter Plummer). While not all of the articles comment directly on discourses and practices of professionalism, they register how writing as an activity traversed and also reinforced contested boundaries between amateurism and professionalism in the GAPE; such boundaries, in different ways, shaped the rise of literature and history as academic disciplines led by professional scholars. In addition, many of the literary texts—short stories, novels, essays, and memoirs—discussed in the articles attend to what constituted expertise or authority in a given field or on a given topic. As the articles by Robbins, Cadle, Plummer, and Nancy C. Unger all reveal, those included question about if and how embodied experiences or feelings were meaningful sources of knowledge.

A range of literary modes and genres that were prestigious or popular during the GAPE, from realism and sentimental fiction (discussed by Cadle) to dime fiction (mentioned by Rouleau), were invested in the depiction and solicitation of embodied

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experience and feeling as sources of information and spurs for readerly interest. The era was also marked by a related interest in the pedagogical function of literature—which involved using literature to convey information (as in the case of Sinclair Lewis's exposure of the unsanitary conditions of the meatpacking industry in *The Jungle*) and also to train readers to think, feel, and act in particular ways (as *The Jungle* does by encouraging its readers to sympathize with oppressed working people, as Cadle discusses).[7] Literature often was and is understood to attempt to train its readers in certain ways of thinking, sensing, and acting. Hence Rouleau and Robbins analyze how writing and reading literature about conflicts between white settlers and Indigenous communities could inculcate particular attitudes toward U.S. colonialism, conquest, and empire. In turn, Cadle recovers early twentieth century debates about the potential role of sentimentalism—that is, the appeal to strong feeling—in leading characters, critics, and readers toward Marxist commitments. Plummer notes that literature about female journalists featured scenes in which those characters learned (or failed) to negotiate their circumscribed place in the public sphere; such texts could offer implicit lessons for readers seeking to understand or even imitate those groundbreaking figures. Robbins and Unger's articles on novels about a young Indigenous activist and European immigrants, respectively, also discuss fictional depictions of inadequate or racist classroom instruction that highlight the need for alternate sources of knowledge and techniques of instruction, such as the kinds provided by the novels themselves. As those articles make clear, at the same time that literature was established as an academic subject within universities, it was also treated as a tool to identify and redress the problems and limitations of prevailing pedagogical methods and institutions.

Literary texts commonly invite readers to forge intimate attachments to what they describe, including characters, objects, ideas, and settings. Literature can help readers to immerse themselves in situations and scenes, and to reflect on the distance and proximity between themselves and the people and places depicted. At the same time, the capacity of literature—and especially fiction—to depict not only what was or is, but also what might have been or will be, is key to its aesthetic, political, and pedagogical power. As this issue shows, fiction provides vivid insights into the aspirations and fantasies that flourished in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, from white-settler visions of Indigenous eradication to unrealized forms of solidarity across boundaries of class, race, gender, and ethnicity. In turn, critics track those fantasies and examine how they emerge from and relate to material conditions and historical processes. All of those affective and speculative elements of literature contribute to its pedagogical functions. And, as this special issue suggests, they apply both to readers in the GAPE and today. Hence Unger argues for the use of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) as a means of introducing students of the GAPE to key issues in the era. The issue's engagement with pedagogy led to the commissioning of two short pieces by Rouleau and Robbins that offer specific teaching materials and strategies related to their longer research articles.

The issue's expansive and multiple treatments of literature's pedagogical functions is in keeping with important recent work on the history of academic literary studies, specifically Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (2020). Buurma and Heffernan challenge prevailing histories of literary studies, which locate key developments and debates in the discipline largely in elite research universities, and which assume that scholarly insights and innovations tend to trickle down into classrooms. Instead, they show the interdependence between key works, methods, and figures of literary criticism and classroom practices at both elite and nonelite institutions from the early-twentieth century through the 1970s.

One of their findings is that professors were combining literary and historical methods and sources and attending to issues of what could be labelled "identity politics" in their classroom across the twentieth century, even as articles in scholarly journals drew distinctions between "formalist" and "historicist" methods. Buurma and Heffernan are explicit about the aim of their study. They offer it as a tool to combat the current economic and political forces that undercut the humanities. They contend, "the absence of a shared and official history and collective memory of [the] inseparability [of research and teaching] has left us vulnerable to interests inside and outside the university that profit from declaring humanities research valueless and teaching a failing endeavor to be radically reinvented," namely by employing extramural and often for-profit educational consultants and tools.[8] Notably, this statement insists on connections not only between research and teaching, but also with activism, and it insists that scholars keep in mind the present political context for their academic work. In those respects, it dovetails with the responses to the critiques of presentism offered by historians including Keisha Blain, Kevin Gannon, and Joan Scott. In that spirit, this special issue seeks to facilitate the work we do as researchers, teachers, and, yes, activists.

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In the first article of the issue, "Compensatory Colonialism: Literature by Elite Children in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," Brian Rouleau focuses on a rarely explored form of children's literature: fiction written by children, self-published on small tabletop presses, and exchanged for stories by other children. Although Rouleau notes that girls and children of color participated in this short-lived fad, it was dominated by elite white boys who chose to write stories celebrating the prevailing tropes of settler colonialism. Rouleau argues that by echoing colonial discourse, the amateur authors were signaling their support of it, while simultaneously rejecting emerging ideas about middle-class children's need for a longer period of protection and maturation before taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. His article is followed by a teaching supplement, which provides some hard to obtain texts produced by young amateur authors as well as suggestions for how they could be used in the classroom to foster critical analysis of the relationships between fantasy, literature, race, and politics.

Sarah Ruffing Robbins discusses literary works and figures that sought to counter the colonial conquest narratives celebrated and reproduced by the young authors featured by Rouleau. "Elaine Eastman's Depiction of History-telling for Young Readers: *Yellow Star*'s Proposals for Counter Narratives of Native American History" uses the young-adult novel *Yellow Star* to illuminate the complex positions of its author—a white woman who married Charles Eastman, an American Indian, and taught on a reservation—and her fictional protagonist—a young Sioux woman negotiating the forces of the white supremacist patriarchy, colonialism, assimilation, and conventional romance. Robbins's account of Elaine Goodale Eastman's motives and goals for attempting to challenge (while at times reinforcing) prevailing stereotypes about American Indians for young readers sheds light on the contested processes of settler colonialism during the GAPE. Robbins also addresses ongoing conversations about how teaching multicultural literature can advance antiracist education and students' understanding of the dynamics of cultural appropriation. Her supplemental teaching feature suggests approaches to teaching relatively accessible documents by Charles Eastman to broaden and deepen classroom discussion concerning the dynamics of Indigeneity, race, and gender, as well as questions of authenticity, authority, and identity.

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Nancy C. Unger's "*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*: Betty Smith's Best-Selling Introduction to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era" examines how a coming-of-age novel published in 1943 has revealed to millions of nonscholars a broad sweep of GAPE issues and developments. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* follows less than seven years in the life of Francie Nolan, who is eleven when the story begins in 1912. Although some have rejected it as a serious source, at times citing the kind of "sentimentalism" that is the subject of Nathan Cadle's article in this issue, this popular novel engages meaningfully with many of the period's hallmarks: immigration, urbanization, industrialization, education, leisure, machine politics, poverty, public health, sexuality and reproduction, religion, organized labor, ethnocentrism, antisemitism, charitable institutions, and the American Dream.

Nathaniel Cadle's "*The Jungle, The Harbor*, and the Radical Sentimental Tradition," traces the legacy of sentimentalism in fiction by socialist writers, including Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Ernest Poole's understudied novel *The Harbor*, as well as in Marxist literary theory. Cadle shows that sentimentalism was not, as some early twentieth-century leftist critics proclaimed, a stylistic dead end. Instead, what Cadle describes as "radical sentimentalism" continued to shape the form and aims of the era's politically-committed and proletarian fiction.

Following Cadle's article is Hunter Plummer's "'Like Home': Gerrymandering the Physical Public Sphere in Female Journalist Narratives." Plummer uses the representation of fictional and nonfictional women journalists to offer keen insights into the gendered and racialized process of women's entry into previously male dominated professions in the GAPE. Examining the role of physical space, Plummer attends to the barriers—including those erected by male colleagues—to the increasing integration of white women and women of color into the public sphere, including how some women used gendered beliefs about feminine space to negotiate the workplace and expand their opportunities.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate the value of using fiction and literary texts more broadly to continue to enrich scholarship on the GAPE. Each of the articles provides new understandings of this period and engages with questions that have historical and contemporary relevance. Those include disagreements regarding who could count as an expert, on what basis, and in what spaces; how racialized and gendered subjects might negotiate the threat of violence to pursue their work; how and why white supremacist settler scripts were embraced and reproduced by children; and what forms of fictional and nonfictional texts might provide sufficient tools for political education in and beyond the classroom. These are active questions in historical and literary studies, not least because scholars in both disciplines face related challenges in the contemporary moment. While there is no facile equivalence between the GAPE and the present era, the articles in this special issue demonstrate some of the approaches and tools that literature and literary study provide to help better comprehend these issues. By highlighting research, pedagogical, and political topics and methods that cut across historical and literary studies, this issue seeks to equip and inspire scholars to continue to work and strategize across disciplinary divisions with the aim of creating new knowledge through writing and teaching, and also countering threats to the academic humanities more broadly.

Notes

1 See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 20th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 96, 101–2.

2 For a classic account of the concept and ideal of "objectivity" in the discipline of history (with some reference to literary studies), see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

3 Homer C. Hockett, "The Literary Motive in the Writing of History," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (Mar. 1926), 476, quoted in John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1965] 1990), 97.

4 Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship*, 97.

5 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

6 For a critique of presentism, see James H. Sweet's American Historical Association Presidential Address "Is History History?: Identity Politics and the Teleologies of the Present," *Perspectives on History* (Sept. 2022), https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present (accessed Jun. 26, 2023). His remarks were understood as a critique of (and in turn, were critiqued by) scholars of Black studies, a field that has long challenged distinctions between disciplines, including those of literature and history. For responses to Sweet, see Keisha Blain, "Black Historians Know There's No Such Things as Objective History," *The New Republic*, Sept. 9, 2022, https://newrepublic.com/article/167680/presentism-history-debate-black-scholarship (accessed Jun. 26, 2023); Kevin Gannon, "On Presentism and History; Or, We're Doing This Again, Are We?" *The Tattooed Prof*, https://thetattooedprof.com/2022/08/19/on-presentism-and-history-or-were-doing-this-again-are-we/ (accessed Jun. 26, 2023); Priya Satia, "The Presentist Trap," *Perspectives on History*, Sept. 7, 2022, https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/october-2022/responses-to-is-history-history (accessed Jun. 26, 2023); Joan W. Scott, "History Is Always About Politics: What the Recent Debates Over Presentism Get Wrong," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 24, 2022 https://www.chronicle.com/article/history-is-always-about-politics (accessed Jun. 26, 2023).

7 On the pedagogical role of literature in the context of the GAPE, see also Laura Fisher, *Reading for Reform: The Social Work of Literature in the Progressive Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), and Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

8 Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 210.

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