Photographs by Hugh Mangum (1877-1922). Courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.
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Introduction

Editors

In the winter of 1851, Nathaniel Hawthorne sat down to write a novel that he hoped would help bring an end to slavery in the United States. "My vocation," he wrote to the editor of The National Era, "is simply that of a painter, and my object will be to hold up in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible Slavery."1 Because he recognized that the popular book market was dominated by women, he decided to serialize the novel under a woman's name—Harriet Beecher Stowe. If he could not join the "mob of scribbling women," he would beat them at their own game. The real Stowe, an admirer of Hawthorne who shared his abhorrence for slavery, was (for a small price) more than happy to go along with the ruse. When Uncle Tom's Cabin was finally published in book form in 1852, it became the best-selling novel of all time. It not only changed publishing history and literary history but American history. Hawthorne never did get credit for what was arguably his greatest achievement. As soon as Stowe realized the profound effect the novel was having, she denied ever having made a deal with Hawthorne and took the laurels (and the royalties) for herself.

We feel compelled to assert, lest the unwary be taken in, that the scenario above is not true. It was made up out of whole cloth during a particularly boring walk around Salt Lake City in late September of this year. Harriet Beecher Stowe really did write Uncle Tom's Cabin and Nathaniel Hawthorne, if he hated slavery at all, didn't hate it enough to write a novel documenting its atrocities. But we begin with a counterfactual literary history in order to ask what difference it would make to our understanding of the world and of American literature if it turned out that the opening scenario were true, if a journal or a series of letters emerged that cast doubt on the authorship of the nineteenth century's most popular novel. What would it mean for our understanding of women's
history? Of midcentury American culture? Of the abolitionist movement? Of “the American Renaissance”? And, perhaps even more important, what evidence would be considered adequate to convince us that our received notion of literary history should be changed so radically?

It was not too long ago that such questions would have been dismissed as hopelessly naive, essentializing, or positivistic. If Derrida rejected the New Criticism and its commitment to the singular meaning of the aesthetic object, he shared with it a commitment to the belief that an author’s life was beyond the critical pale. Given his assertion (repeated in different ways throughout his career) that any communication, written or oral, functions as “a grapheme,” or “the nonpresent remainder of a differential mark cut off from its putative ‘production’ or origin,” one can imagine him finding any handwringing over who wrote what as, at best, an amusing distraction. But even as deconstruction was catching on in English departments in the 1980s, there was vehement pushback. Feminist, Black, Indigenous, and Queer critics argued that the embodied experience of the writer was not “putative” but real, and that it mattered, both politically and formally. There were others who, while convinced by arguments for both the “death of the author” and the importance of lived experience, claimed that you could be true both to theory and to identity. In Literature after Feminism, for example, Rita Felski argued that “we can factor the author into our readings of literary works without reducing literature to autobiography or assuming that such links determine the meaning of the work once and for all.”

Our sense is that no one would feel obligated to defend using biographical details in literary scholarship today. Indeed, over the years that we have been editing this journal, we noted this renewed interest in the life of the author, often remarking on the way that the critical investment in lived experience had eclipsed the investment in what used to be known as “theory.” And then, late last year, we received a short essay by Jordan Stein that focused on how scholars tend to ignore Hawthorne’s sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle. Claiming that “a possible biographical basis for Hawthorne’s career-wide concern about sexual violence was raised and then largely disregarded over the past thirty years because it cannot be proven,” Stein argues that this familiar kind of critical scrupulousness might “say something unfortunate about the limits of our methods as scholars and something far worse about the limits of our empathy as people.” Because this essay raises, in the most provocative way, exactly the questions about the resurgence of biogra-
phy we had been contemplating, we leaped at the opportunity to put together a forum on the issue.

A call for additional essays produced such an array of fascinating submissions that we expanded the forum from the usual four to a highly unusual fourteen. We created what we’ve come to think of as a Mega-Forum that brings together a diverse range of authors, who are at different stages in their careers and who work in a variety of disciplines (not only English, but religious studies, law, history, and African American studies). Indeed, the list of topics under investigation is quite eclectic and includes madhouse memoirs, Black religious traditions, Confederate monuments, debilitating illnesses, unanswered letters, racial passing, lesbian eroticism, gaps in the archive, legal rules of evidence, kidnapping, the hidden effects of sexual assault, authorial ethics, and midcentury literary reputations. But, because patterns emerged as well, we have arranged the essays in three thematic clusters—“Legacies of Enslavement,” “Questions of Evidence,” and “Cases.” Although we recognize that each essay is complicated and could easily fit into multiple categories (or, indeed, be the basis of an entirely different mode of categorization), we think this arrangement is illuminating because it links essays that are posing similar kinds of questions about how biography informs new scholarship.

In the “Legacies of Enslavement” cluster, essays by Jessie Morgan-Owens, Ahmad Greene-Hayes, Janet Neary, and Scott Hancock investigate the complications and the rewards of tracing the experiences (both collective and individual) of Black Americans that official histories typically suppressed or ignored. The rhetorical question at the center of Morgan-Owens’s essay—“What does it mean to have a story worth telling?”—characterizes the shared project of this cluster: not only to register and perhaps fill in the absences of official history but to link these stories to current political tensions. Essays in the “Evidence” cluster, written by DeLisa D. Hawkes, Simon Stern, Zachary Tavlin, Liana Kathleen Glew, and Kelsey Squire, focus more squarely on the theoretical issues raised by this new wave of biographical criticism. For instance, what should count (as Hawkes asks) as legitimate evidence of racial identity? Or, as Tavlin asks, to what extent should we treat the lived experience of the author as mediated by aesthetic form? Or, as Stern asks, what unacknowledged standards of proof underwrite critical investment in biography? In the “Cases” cluster, essays by Scott Peeples, Shari Goldberg, Melissa J. Homestead, Gordon Hutner, and Jordan Alexander Stein, focus on how this renewed interest in
biography, rather than leading back to an old-fashioned commitment to explaining the work in terms of the life, becomes a provocation to the critic to think differently about the lives of both authors and readers. As Goldberg asks, how would scholarship change if critics acknowledged that the experience of living in a very particular bodymind is the lens through which they make sense of a text? Taken together, these essays suggest that the biographical impulse might cultivate unexpected insights about nineteenth-century fiction and its relevance for the present moment.

**Further Reading:**


**Notes**