Similarly, many would argue that true Hip Hop is the underground movement that grew out of an urban youth culture, also mixing entertainment with comically exaggerated reality, while commercial or mainstream Hip Hop is co-opted, a narrowed and watered-down version of the art form and the experiences behind its message.

Interestingly, The Source was started and is owned by two Caucasian males, both Harvard graduates.

Works Cited


“One of my regular teaching assignments at William and Mary is a 3-credit undergraduate course in “American Literature, 1835–1865,” a course known until recently as “The American Renaissance.” Like many such courses around the country, our offering had taken its title from F. O. Matthiessen’s The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (1941). The reasons for the change in title will be familiar to readers of this journal. We had long since moved beyond the five writers, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman, studied by Matthiessen to include as well Douglass, Jacobs, Fern, Fuller, Stowe, Fitzhugh, Dickinson, Parker, and Brownson, among others. Further, where, as Myra Jehlen has remarked, Matthiessen had “recast” political questions “as artistic problems within a separate literary frame of reference,” today we move in the opposite direction: to see how “literature” participates in the intense, increasingly bitter conflicts over politics, race, gender, ideology, and the meaning of “America” itself that characterize this period (2).

I discovered that the most effective way to move outside Matthiessen’s New Critical “separate literary frame of reference” was by using a wide range of contemporary periodicals as a means of situating “literature” within its multiple contexts. Both through lectures and individual research assignments leading to oral reports and longer papers, I ask students to examine the periodicals in which many of the works studied first appeared. How were periodicals financed? Who read them? What do we know about their political commitments? In what ways did politics shape literary content and reviewing? How much did the various periodicals pay? What else appeared in the periodicals? By using periodicals to consider fundamental questions about authorship, politics, readership, and publication, it is possible to raise basic questions about the multiple connections between “art” and “life.”

As such writers as Irving and Cooper discovered as early as the 1820s, it now became possible to earn one’s living as a professional writer in America.
Periodical publication served as a major source of income for many of the writers studied. The publisher Robert Bonner paid Fanny Fern large sums for her contributions to his New York Ledger, which in 1856 had a circulation of “180,000, the highest ever reached by an American periodical up to that time” (Warren 59). After the commercial and critical disappointments of Moby-Dick (1851) and Pierre (1852), Melville turned to such periodicals as Harper’s and Putnam’s, where in November and December of 1853 he published “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street.” In October, November, and December of 1855 Putnam’s also published “Benito Cereno.” In December 1844, Margaret Fuller moved to New York to write for Horace Greeley’s New-York Daily Tribune, where she also would send her important dispatches from Britain and Europe. As is well known, Whitman served his “long foreground” in the years before the 1855 edition as an editor and writer, primarily for Democratic papers, including the New York Aurora and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle; throughout his career he continued to publish in both newspapers and magazines. After returning from Britain in 1847, Frederick Douglass established The North Star (later Frederick Douglass’s Paper) in Rochester, New York. Edgar Allan Poe long dreamed of founding his own periodical, The Stylus, as a way of bypassing the editors and publishers who, he felt, stood between him and his audience, to say nothing of the profits that were rightfully his. Despite his own protestations on the destructive effects of commercialism in the literary marketplace, Thoreau sought to earn a living by writing for various periodicals. While in Walden he denounced the orator he addressed himself to “the mob before him,” he himself was a powerful antislavery orator and publicist. To analyze these and other periodical connections is to ask what it meant to be a professional writer in antebellum America.

Further, consider the role of periodicals at this time is to confront the question of the relationship between “literature” and “politics.” As Perry Miller put it in The Raven and the Whale, “Today we can hardly conceive how in the 1840s the political parties were involved with the concern for literature and education. Protectionism was not something separate from style; a man’s stand on the Bank was one with his stand on the romance. A union not only of the nation, but the nation’s mind was the reason for being of the Democratic Review” (110). Praised for its advocacy of literary nationalism and encouragement of American writers, the United States Magazine and Democratic Review was established by John L. O’Sullivan and his brother-in-law Samuel Langtree in Washington in 1837 as an organ of the Democratic Party, and it supported its positions on such questions as the elimination of the Bank of the United States, annexation of Texas, vigorous prosecution of the Mexican War, states’ rights, Indian removal, and the “Gag Rule” by which Congress refused to consider petitions aimed at eliminating slavery in the District of Columbia. How are we to understand Hawthorne’s long association with the monthly? Similarly, in analyzing such works as “Benito Cereno” and the “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish” chapter of Moby-Dick, I ask students to consider the Democratic Review as prime mover in the campaign for “Manifest Destiny,” a phrase invented by O’Sullivan (Pratt 213). Melville asks, “Was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by waiving it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish” (Moby-Dick 310).

While the Virginian George Fitzhugh may have been, as C. Vann Woodward has argued, “sui generis,” he found a congenial home in the New Orleans monthly De Bow’s Review, a journal that sought to exemplify precisely the sort of self-contained Southern intellectual life for which Fitzhugh campaigned (Woodward xiv–xv). As I have mentioned, one cannot overestimate the importance for Fuller’s development as a writer of Horace Greeley’s Whig Tribune, which forthrightly opposed slavery and the Mexican War. And why does Coverdale, the narrator of Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance, decide, when taking a respite from the utopian community at Blithedale, to “hold a little talk with the conservatives, the writers of the North American Review, the merchants, the Cambridge men, and all those respectable old blockheads, who still, in this intangibility and mistiness of affairs, kept a death-grip on one or two ideas that had not come into vogue since yesterday morning”? (141). Students come to see that the periodicals themselves constituted a political battleground, a place where the principal political parties and factions within the parties fought over the central questions of the age.

Over the course of the semester, I help students draw from the periodical context in three basic ways: a) by selecting and reproducing for them suggestive articles; b) by pointing them to scholarship that considers the importance of periodicals in the lives of these writers, and c) by asking students in their individual reports and research papers to explore the periodical context of the literature.

Articles from periodicals are invaluable in helping students to see the world from a contemporary perspective. For instance, early in the course I distribute to students a leader on “White, Black, and Red,” published on February 13, 1864 in a New York weekly, The Round Table (1863–69). Two cousins, Charles Humphreys
Sweetser (1841–71) and Henry Edward Sweetser (1837–70), graduates respectively of Amherst and Yale, established the vibrant, iconoclastic periodical, and served as its initial editors. Henry Sweetser, incidentally, was a cousin of Emily Dickinson, whose poem “My Sabbath” appeared in its pages on March 12, 1864 (195). Strong supporters of Lincoln and the war effort, the Sweetser’s nevertheless developed a racial taxonomy that is shocking to students today, but which was a basic construct in antebellum America, North and South. “That the white man is the highest of the three races is hardly a more unquestionable fact than that the negro is the lowest,” The Round Table asserts. “Neither the Indian nor the African, left to himself, enters on a career of progressive civilization: the Indian, because of the fierce independence of spirit which forbids aggregation and subdivision of employment; and the African, because he is so wholly devoid of this spirit. He is a grown up child. . . . He needs a superior race to cling to.” How are the two “inferior” races to be compared? “The Indian and the Negro stand at opposite poles of the spheres of ethology. The Indian is stern, impassive, and solitary; the African is joyous, susceptible, and gregarious. . . . The Indian has little of natural and spontaneous enjoyment of life: the African is overflowing with it. . . . his life is a prolonged childhood” (Feb. 13, 1864, 181).

Paradoxically, these assertions appear in the course of an editorial calling for a social program that will bring “justice” to the black man once the war is over. The African race will need “protection, kindness, and sympathy. Neglect alone will do for him what active hostility has done for the Indian. If we undertake to lead him out of the house of bondage, we must not let go his hand until the promised land is reached” (Feb. 13, 1864, 181). One can contrast the position of The Round Table with that of such theorists as Senator Daniel Walker of Mississippi, who in the 1840s supported Texas annexation as a means of drawing Blacks to Texas from areas in which slavery was ceasing to be profitable, eventually inducing them to migrate to Mexico and further south, where they could merge with the brown-skinned races of Latin America, thereby creating an America free of Blacks, a theory supported by the Democratic Review. At least The Round Table envisions a place for Blacks in the new America. At some level, the Sweetser’s may well have recognized the need for rethinking race relations, and yet the frame of racial topologies drawn from the “science” of ethnology inhibits their ability to do so.

“White, Black, and Red” provides a suggestive context for approaching a number of texts from this period. For instance, the Sweetser’s conception of the mental capacity of the “African” race is virtually identical to that of Captain Amsa Delano, protagonist of Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” whose preconceptions about the limited capacity of Blacks make it impossible for him to comprehend the power relationships aboard the becalmed slave ship San Dominick, which he boards to see if he can provide assistance to its captain and crew. The unsuspecting Delano is incapable of decoding the elaborate masquerade staged by the Africans, who have taken control of the ship, as part of their plot to capture Delano’s boat and then return to Africa and freedom. The Round Table editorial also provides a suggestive context for reading Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and other slave narratives.

One reason that I assign The Blithedale Romance (in the excellent Bedford Cultural Edition, edited by William Cain) is to engage students with questions of reform and the search for social justice, among other subjects. Almost entirely missing from the novel itself—and critical discussions as well—is the position of the social conservatives against whom the communal residents of Blithedale are rebelling. But as I have suggested above, Hawthorne provides a clue in Coverdale’s report that he plans to visit the writers and editors associated with The North American Review as well as with the State Street bankers and other conservatives. To help students imagine the sort of conversation that Coverdale might have had with the “old blockheads” who edited the North American Review and taught at Harvard, I sometimes reproduce that journal’s essay-review from January 1853 on The House of the Seven Gables and Blithedale Romance. Here the Harvard professor Andrew Preston Peabody (1811–1893) still feels compelled to repudiate the socialism of the fictional Blithedale and the real Brook Farm, actually drawing from “Christian” principles to justify the extremes of wealth: “Yet the extirpation of penury would hardly be a social benefit, if with it were to be rooted up the sympathies and charities which result from the intermingling the rich and the poor. We do not believe that the Creator ever intended that human institutions and arrangements should produce worthy and valuable results independently of human virtue. . . . The only self-adjusting social system must be that of a thoroughly Christianized commonwealth. We look with entire complacency on large accumulations of property by individuals” (247).

Century.” Larry J. Reynolds explores the significance for Fuller’s style of her shift from Dial writer and editor to regular writer for a great metropolitan daily, Greeley’s Tribune. In “From Periodical Writer to Poet: Whitman’s Journey through Popular Culture,” David S. Reynolds traces Whitman’s evolution through the several newspapers he edited, and in “Uncommon Discourse: Fanny Fern and the New York Ledger,” Joyce Warren shows just what being a professional writer meant for Fanny Fern. My own essay for that collection, “Don’t Tell! They’d Advertise: Emily Dickinson and the Round Table,” deals with the anomalous appearance of Dickinson’s “Some Keep the Sabbath” in The Round Table as a means of exploring her conception of the writer’s vocation in the midst of the changing literary marketplace.10

Over the past few years, I have conducted the course, which enrolls up to thirty students each semester, as a kind of seminar, one in which students present short interpretive reports making use of the periodical context. Some years ago, William and Mary purchased the American Periodical Series, which makes available on microfilm complete runs of virtually every periodical, and our library does hold hard-copy runs of a number of periodicals, but many are in fragile condition. Especially useful, then, is the web-based “Making of America” series, which in searchable form offers complete runs of periodicals that are central to this period, including Democratic Review, American (Whig) Review, North American Review, Princeton Review, Atlantic Monthly, DeBow’s, North American, and Southern Literary Messenger, among others. The availability of this series makes it possible for students everywhere to conduct original research using periodicals, as exemplified by the student paper reproduced here.

In her essay on “Civil Disobedience, and the Democratic Review,” Jennifer Powell’s exploration of Democratic Review articles on the moral and constitutional question of returning fugitive slaves to Africa brings to light what Emerson, Thoreau, and others sought to counter in their antislavery addresses and essays. As sectional animosity intensified, the Democratic Review grew increasingly determined to defend the South from those Transcendentalists who recognized a “higher law” than even the Constitution. At issue were slaves’ rights, the citizen’s moral responsibility, the citizen’s possible sense of competing obligations to the Constitution, a “higher law,” and the humanity of the African “race.”

Among the challenges of making such heavy use of periodicals is to leave time for the sort of close and suggestive reading that all of us prize. Thoreau argues in the “Reading” chapter of Walden for a distinction between what he calls “the select language of literature” and ordinary discourse, asserting that “the noblest written words are commonly as far behind or above the fleeting spoken language as the firmament with its stars is behind the clouds... The orator yields to the inspiration of a transient occasion, and speaks to the mob before him, to those who can hear him; but the writer, whose more equitable life is his occasion, and who would be distracted by the event and the crowd which inspire the orator, speaks to the intellect and heart of mankind, to all who in any age can understand him.” But in 1854, the year that Walden appeared, Thoreau, whose life was hardly “equable,” was himself a highly visible public orator, delivering “Slavery in Massachusetts” to an audience in Framingham. He published the address in William Lloyd Garrison’s Liberator on July 21, 1854.11 The “select language of literature” of Walden and the impassioned language of the “Address, Delivered at the Anti-Slavery Celebration in Framingham, July 4th, 1854” intersect in revealing ways. Providing an essential frame for understanding that intersection, periodicals help us to comprehend the conflicts that lie at the heart of antebellum America and its literary flowering.

Notes


5Information is readily available in the standard anthologies.


7For a study of Thoreau’s attempt to earn a living as a writer for periodicals, see Steven Fink, Prophet in the Marketplace (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.)


Scholnick, Robert J. “Don’t Tell! They’d Advertise’: Emily Dickinson in The Round Table.” In Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America, pp. 166–82.


