

Teaching C19 as Counter-Narrative

Kathryn Wichelns

University of New Mexico

What does it mean to teach nineteenth-century American literatures right now? As instructors and scholars of another tumultuous era shaped by populism, nativism, monopoly capitalism, US expansionism, and brutal racial/ethnic conflict, how do we engage ethically with our pedagogical responsibilities in the midst of unprecedented transformations in higher education? I am faculty in the English Department of a flagship R-1, Hispanic-serving public university in a majority-minority state in the US Southwest. Student enrollments are still recovering from the extended dip brought about by the pandemic, but my colleagues and I encountered a new shift in our Spring 2025 classrooms: online classes were full, but in-person courses (including mine) were smaller and whiter than usual. Based on student input, many of us concluded that the lack of leadership from the University of New Mexico's (UNM) administration, exacerbated by false social media reports of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers descending in force on Albuquerque, was one key factor in our students' decisions to avoid campus.

Designated a Sanctuary Campus in 2017 as a result of staff and faculty advocacy, UNM has a long history of celebrating its diverse student body. While voting patterns vary by county, New Mexico generally leans Democrat. However, following Donald Trump's second Presidential victory, faculty began receiving troublingly vague messages from university leadership that did little to address concerns about likely Executive Orders and their impact. As the Spring 2025

opened, a long-standing online resource for undocumented students, which had included an official photo and statement of support from UNM President Garnett Stokes, was removed from the university's website. Instead, listserv messages provided faculty with instructions to ensure compliance, should ICE officers attempt to arrest students in our classrooms. UNM employees independently organized a series of training sessions, in which we learned in detail about our own and our students' legal rights and responsibilities. Humanities faculty generally don't face the existential crises that our colleagues in the sciences are experiencing—federal grant cancellations will kill important research projects, including longitudinal studies on differential health outcomes among Native and rural New Mexican populations—but the climate of non-transparency and capitulation that marks my university's response to the Trump administration means that many of us fear our most vulnerable student populations could lose equal access to the community forums of the campus, the laboratory, and the physical classroom.

Teaching ENGL 363: “Nineteenth-Century America” in this context, I've found myself engaging more than usual with a conundrum that defines our field. To what degree should I invite my students to draw connections between C19 material and current events? As scholars, we resist anachronism, and our first job is to teach our students *how*, not *what*, to think. But this semester has renewed my sense of university teaching as an essential public service. Nineteenth-century texts serve as counter-narrative to the forms of cultural amnesia that shape MAGA-oriented understandings of American ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, citizenship, sexuality, (im)migration, religion, and national culture. Even the most canonical C19 syllabus demonstrates that the US has always been a shifting community founded in forms of diversity. White, male writers of the long nineteenth century are among its most impassioned, influential critics of the pre-Civil War and post-Reconstruction eras. It takes determined censorship of James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry David Thoreau, or Mark Twain not to find progressive resistance in their work. From Lowell's fervent “The Present Crisis” (1845) to Twain's darkly satirical *Puddn'head Wilson* (1894), white-male-authored “high literature” of the nineteenth-century US describes an era that resonates uncannily with our own.

But we fail our students and our discipline if we don't emphasize the centrality of non-white, working-class, women's, (im)migrant, and what we now refer to as LGBTQ+ writing to literary movements of the period. Thoreau, Twain *et al* occupy a shared public space and a contested sense of national community

with Charles W. Chesnutt, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Walt Whitman, and Sarah Winnemucca. By simply offering our students the scope of C19 writing—in a manner entirely consistent with how nineteenth-century Americans understood their own culture—we reveal the revisionism of MAGA’s cultural nostalgia. Our course materials trace a more objective history of white and/or Christian nationalism, of (im)migration, and of gender and sexual diversity in the US than those available to our students in social media and other forms of public discourse. Teaching nineteenth-century American literature accurately and well is itself an act of resistance.

Place-based pedagogy is one means of demonstrating the ongoing relevance of nineteenth-century discourses. Alongside the 1855 “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass*, my students read two 1846 editorials that Whitman wrote for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in support of an expansionist war with Mexico that, among other consequences, would end with the 1848 cession of *Nuevo México* to the US. These journalistic pieces illustrate the contradictions inherent to Whitman’s early ideas about American nationalism. Prior to reading Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), we briefly explore post-Emancipation Proclamation Congressional debates about the New Mexico Territory’s peonage system, obligate unpaid labor imposed on Native and mestizo populations in different forms throughout the Southwest’s history. Emphasizing our own legacy of racialized exploitation gives my students a fuller sense of Ruiz de Burton’s relationship to ideologies of whiteness and class. It also counters predominant representations of New Mexico as a site of “tri-cultural harmony” among Anglo, Spanish, and Native communities—and allows students to develop informed perspectives on local conversations about colonial history.

Grappling with some questions about pedagogical ethics and presentism, I recently asked my students in “Nineteenth-Century America” to respond anonymously to a prompt: “What, if any, perspectives or insights about contemporary US politics and culture do you gain from studying nineteenth-century American literatures? How, if at all, has the material covered in our course affected your views about the cultures you inherit and participate in?” All but one chose to respond, and the group’s input suggests that my students see clear parallels between the material we’ve been reading together and the conflicts of the Trump era.

One student expressed a weary sense of inevitability that I also hear in my professional communities: “The United States often has clashing ideologies/

hypocrisies involved with it. Our nation is founded on good principles, yet in action we fall short. {MAGA} discourse has roots since the birth of this nation. Ongoing and continuing.” But another student’s comments were more typical:

“Material covered in our course...has made me frustrated with the culture I participate in, especially at the university. It is frustrating to be educated within an institution caving to dangerous demands. It is nearly impossible to not feel hypocritical, as a combined culture/society/classroom, when learning painfully repetitive and familiar history through literature. I hope for more action from this department and the university as a whole.”

A third student, who volunteered that they identify as “conservative/independent” politically, wrote that in response to reading nineteenth-century texts, “I have retained my values but allowed my perspective to adopt a new scope of understanding...The way I choose to live my life & treat others has shifted to less opinionated, less polarized, more individualized.”

A number of respondents drew direct connections between the material we’ve read together and current events. One answer reads:

“I think the relation of ICE to both {Martin} Delany {*Blake; or the Huts of America*, 1859} and Harriet Jacobs {*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861} has been profound to think and feel. The government is currently disappearing people—reading Jacobs and her constant terror of being found either when she is in hiding or when she is north, it just rings so ominously similar to what is happening w/deportations etc.”

As this student concluded, “I found it wild to read a narrative of the depravity of Wall St. & capital & exploitation in Melville {“*Bartleby the Scrivener*,” 1853},” which seems “quite applicable now.”

I found these comments simultaneously reassuring and challenging. My students don’t need me to heavy-handedly point out resonances between Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s “*The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*” (1873) and the era of Elon Musk’s DOGE—they can draw those connections themselves. Even my most conservative students reject MAGA narratives about higher education as leftist brainwashing: they regard their university classrooms as informed, ethically-moderated communities productively shaped by ideological and other forms of diversity. They would like to be able to discuss their varied

concerns about our current period in this trusted public space. Several students indicated that they feel better informed about our regional and national present, following a semester's study of "Nineteenth-Century America." I'm still figuring out how best to address their input. Perhaps I'll close the semester by exploring the ideal of the forum or lecture hall, which so influenced nineteenth-century figures from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Frances E. W. Harper. I'll ask them what role they think the university should play in public discourse, in our challenging times. Based on my experiences with them this semester, I think their responses will be both unexpected and galvanizing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathryn Wichelns is an Associate Professor of English at the University of New Mexico.

