

## Spending Time in the Nineteenth Century

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- 1 This special issue of *New American Studies Journal: A Forum* looks at nineteenth-century American literature and culture through the analytical lens of free time and leisure. This analytical framework affords a novel access point to American literary history—free time, as this special issue will explore, is a highly contested and politicized concept and resource<sup>[1]</sup> of the nineteenth century, one that restructures temporalities and spaces. Nineteenth-century American culture and literature can be understood as an archive to explore free time as a significant social and economic innovation into the texture of individual life. Free time facilitated a re-organization of bodies, modes of transportation, and it transformed the dissemination of information. Acknowledging these dynamics helps us see how time designated and allocated specifically as “free” was a capitalist invention. Free time, too, filled and created novel consumer demand(s) and came to create new social strata (i.e., the professional managerial class or leisure classes) by way of spatial and temporal re-alignments. This special issue of the *New American Studies Journal: A Forum* explores the rise of free time in the nineteenth century with particular attention toward temporal and spatial reconfigurations that free time afforded. It also explores the societal and cultural aspects of free time that grew around the logics and logistics of nineteenth-century capitalism—a social formation that made leisure, time off work, not merely possible, but that created entire industries and spaces for leisure and repose.
- 2 The essays in this special issue mine the archive of American literature to explore “state of having time at one’s own disposal; time which one can spend as one pleases; free or unoccupied time” (“leisure”). When turning to literary negotiations of social and aesthetic practices subsumed under leisure, we learn that free time was not spent as leisurely or carefree as we might expect. The essays expose contradictions and tensions between participation and dis-engagement, private and public spheres, and the understanding of the self in relation to the other. They calibrate free time against the social entanglements and falling in love (as [Majewska](#) suggests), information overload (as [Schober](#) argues in her contribution), walling off and being walled off (as [Urie](#) explores), lounging and resting (as [my contribution](#) shows), as well as the conspicuous display of loafing (as [Hoepker](#) argues). Ultimately, the essays show how notions of community, solidarity, but also solitude shape and are shaped by free time and free-time activities such as resting, loafing, refusing, expanding, or flirting, activities contrary to the new dictum of work and time in the nineteenth century.

- 3 [Regina Schober's article](#) begins the conversation about free time. She explores the anxieties of data overload and “hyperreading” of the twenty-first century by way of the nineteenth century, arguing that a digital-humanities approach toward Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Frank Norris’s *The Octopus: A Story of California* reveals the overflow of information that already washed over the nineteenth century, building up to the abundance of information in our time. Schober’s contribution shows how a textual analysis can be sensitive to media processes (and vice versa), and she argues that these novels can demonstrate “what it means to read in the nineteenth century and to critically (re-)read the nineteenth century from a twenty-first century perspective.” The nineteenth century speaks to the digitized contemporary moment in compelling ways, for it “prefigures and paves the way for some of the technological debates prevalent today. Also, it serves as a comparative instance that both reminds us of (partly recurrent) social and cultural patterns of meaning-making vis-à-vis data-based epistemologies, while simultaneously bringing into sharp focus the particular nature of current debates.” Canonical texts, such as *Moby-Dick* and *The Octopus*, challenge what it means to organize information while laying bare the social patterns of dissemination and reading.
- 4 [Magda Majewska's article](#) on Henry James’s novel *Wings of the Dove* (1902) explores how showing intimacy in public marks a turning point in the concept of romantic relationships. Love, in the nineteenth century, became a matter of public concern, of display, and of being seen, as Majewska’s reading of the scene in the subway car demonstrates. Divisions between private and public, interior and exterior, and also love and happiness took on new meanings that had spatial dimensions. These notions also had personal dimensions, which Majewska explores through Niklas Luhmann’s theory of romantic love as a self-referential system (“love sociology”). Her analysis of the “growing differentiation of highly personal, intimate relations and those that are impersonal and externally motivated” helps open up the *Wings of the Dove* in ways that expose both the paradoxes of romantic love, as it developed in the nineteenth century, and the contradictions of free time.
- 5 [Andrew Urie's article](#) on Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” explores the larger psychosocial effects of how time spent in office settings contributes to isolation and despair. His essay “Melville’s Massive Missive” aligns and augments an interdisciplinary reading of “Bartleby” as a meta-reflection on the author’s declining literary career and on “the alienating effects of working within [a] rapidly changing urban society.” Urie’s careful analysis of Melville’s short story demonstrates how the lens of leisure time foreshadows the alienating and isolating effects of capitalism in the twenty-first century. In this way, “Bartleby” qualifies itself as a work about *conflicted* and *conflicting* psychosocial realities. The short story’s “troubled, enigmatic protagonist increasingly disrupts the narrator’s own conception of selfhood, thereby threatening to destroy his worldview” and his work ethic. Bartleby famously prefers not to. While his refusal to work may not count as repose, it certainly unearths the anxieties about a healthy balancing of work and free time in

the nineteenth century, while calling into question capitalist individualism, the division between private and public spheres explored in Majewska's article, and between the managerial class and the organization of knowledge explored by Schober.

- 6 [My essay](#) on Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* examines the juxtaposition of self and other, alienation and community, friendship and leisure. By way of the book's famous fourth chapter, "The Counterpane," I argue for a shift of understanding about the subjective experience of resting and relaxation. Repose, conceived as a way of spending time, exposes some of the contradictions of the capitalist dictum of industriousness. The quilt that features prominently in that chapter can be seen as a figure of resting and relaxing, which accumulates a patchwork of additional meanings through Ishmael's experiences in the night at the Spouter-Inn. Ishmael becomes confused about the boundary between himself and others, and his confusion disturbs the seemingly settled meaning of bodies—and thoughts—at rest. "The Counterpane" thus exposes the "uneasy boundaries within the emerging industrial civilization and laboring body that *Moby-Dick* chronicles," while exploring the changing significance of friendship through Ishmael and Queequeg's developing relationship.
- 7 [Karin Hoepker's article](#) examines the literary genealogy of the social figure of loafer in canonical texts of the nineteenth century, focusing on the racial and political implications of not working in ways that complement Urie's reading of "Bartleby." Drawing from a wide array of sources such as the *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1848), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Fredrick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*, Hoepker outlines a moment of American capitalism when labor, and not working, took on different meanings in the North and the South. Like the other contributors to this special issue, Hoepker traces societal and cultural developments and dilemmas of the nineteenth century through the lens of free time and explores the effects of modernization processes, industrialization, and the standardization of time on the individual.
- 8 Our modern sense of leisure time must be understood as a result of the re-structuring of work hours and new work routines in the nineteenth century brought about by accelerated industrialization and mass production, but also political movements such as the Shorter-Hour Movement that advocated freedom for the individual beyond the marketplace (Hunnicuttt 6). W.G. Greg has noted that "doubtless the outstanding mark of life in the second half of the nineteenth century is *speed*—the hurry that fills it, the speed with which we move, the great pressure under which we work—and it behooves us, first, to consider the question whether this great speed is something intrinsically good, and second, the question whether it is worth the price we pay for it—a price that we can only estimate and reliably determine with difficulty" (in Rosa 40). With life speeding up, Americans at the end of the nineteenth century posed these questions as they become more mobile, as telephones facilitated communication, and as a vaster array of commercial offerings[2] and locales helped scatter activities. Indeed, there was a wide range of free time activities

such as barn raisings, “corn huskings, and harvest festivals; weddings and baptisms; and holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas provided breaks in the work routine, and occasions for family and community celebrations, as did elections, muster days (where local militias assembled and marched) and—after 1776—the Fourth of July” (Boyer 437). Gary Cross in *A Social History of Leisure* links this differentiation of activities to different societal shifts in leisure practices that ran parallel to one another. The “quest for leisure had two faces. First, it was a complex accommodation to a new industrial understanding of time. Second, it was a challenge to the social and cultural implications of the 19th-century [sic] gospel of work” (73). Having time at one’s own disposal created both a new dictum of time that afforded personal liberties, yet it also afforded personal liberties that were precarious and uneasy. Freedom, liberty (of both the self and the market), and their attendant anxieties are at the core of the temporal realignment of the nineteenth century.

- 9 Cross reminds us that by the end of the nineteenth century “time strategies had largely merged. [...] Leisure time was radically segmented from work and packaged into predictable frames of time. Leisure was distributed into long blocks of free hours extended over day, week, year, and life span” (75). In this way, workers and employers had free time at their disposal to define themselves, to use free time adequately – they not only “adjusted to the new economic realities of worktime but attempted to recapture leisure hours lost during industrialization and ‘repackage’ it” (74–75). Such repackaging would include lengthy holidays in resorts: vacationing, for instance, afforded its own temporalities and spatial orders, and Cindy Aron in *Working At Play* explains that vacationing for early nineteenth-century Americans was a sign of elitism and privilege. She simultaneously detects a cultural anxiety revolving around vacations undertaken by working classes, for cultural commentators feared that “vacations would ruin a labor force already prone to self-indulgence” (10). Leisure and vacations suddenly corrupted the industrious—and time “off” work might inspire laziness and idleness, but also the opening of ever new markets and networks, as well as the commodification of cities as tourist destinations. Similarly, “saving up” leisure time to the end of your life afforded “repackaging” as well, like Benjamin Franklin shows us, who saw his early retirement as deferred leisure.
- 10 The eighteenth-century man of leisure, such as Benjamin Franklin, was a gentleman, after all, not a laborer. Economic terminologies of repackaging and saving up, dating from this period, suggest that time was more and more understood as an economic resource. Leisure time in the nineteenth-nineteenth-century sense was to be understood “as a distinct non-work time, whether in the form of the holiday, weekend, or evening,” and it “was a result of the disciplined and bounded work time created by capitalist production” (Fulcher 8). “Banking on the future,” in other words saving time so that it can be wisely reused later in life, finds its literary opposite in the refusal to engage in the present, as Melville’s *Bartleby* shows us, or in the preserving of scraps that go into the making a quilt, and into the making of the encounters that occur beneath it. Both *Bartleby* and *Ishmael* explore different (sensual) experiences

of attention and community. The two articles on Melville explore how the increasing capitalist organization of time destabilized earlier and more communal moments of free time that were largely centered around family life and religious and local institutions. Melville directs our attention to the “growing instrumental attitude toward work as a mere economic means [and] to practically the only remaining arena of personal freedom: leisure” (Cross 75).

- 11 Capitalism began to infiltrate and restructure *when* and *where* people spent their time away from work. Industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century paved the way to not only create leisure time but also venues and markets for leisure—where the individual, who defined him- or herself through work and leisure, could spend it. Paul S. Boyer points out that “social and economic changes in the mid- to late nineteenth century affected leisure practices. Urbanization encouraged commercialized leisure, stratified by social class and varying among different immigrant groups. Canals, railroads, the National Road, and steamboats allowed lecturers, performers, circuses, and theatrical companies to reach interior cities. In the larger cities, a new commercial elite patronized the opera, concert halls, theaters, and art museums” (438). We see how American literature explores commercialized leisure in nineteenth-century American society as a multifaceted phenomenon that is governed by the dynamics of the intermingling of cultural, political, and economic sectors and markets, as well as the anxieties about prescribed forms of how to spend time.
- 12 The common denominator for individuals seeking diversion—and not merely work—was now also the *market*, and Cross underlines how “the supply for entertainment reflected the common denominator” (126). David Surdam coins the term “leisure consumption” to describe this dynamic (9). The book market also plays a role here. Richard Butsch describes the importance of the *commercialized* aspect of leisure; he writes that “although [...] activities as theatergoing were already commercial in the eighteenth century, leisure-time pursuits did not depend generally upon purchased products and services until the late nineteenth century. [...] Many local entrepreneurs who had catered to class-specific markets were displaced by national oligopolies that market their wares to the ‘masses’” (3–4). The leisure market is thus linked to the emergence of mass culture and the standardization of culture in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and this “leisure consumption” not only restructures time, but also the spaces where free time could be spent.
- 13 During the nineteenth century, commercialized leisure venues such as beer gardens, sport games, arcades and parlors, and theaters offered a variety of new experiences, including new sensations of space and time, to visitors. Likewise, activities like shopping and traveling, vacationing and going to a phonograph parlor afforded new ways to move, to explore, to lounge, to be seen, and to connect to each other and disconnect from the self. James Fulcher writes how mass travel “to spectator sports, especially football and horse-racing, where people could be charged for entry, was now possible. The importance of this can hardly be exaggerated, for whole new industries

were emerging to exploit and develop the leisure market, which was to become a huge source of consumer demand, employment, and profit” (8–9). Schober’s and Majewska’s articles in particular explore the economics and politics of spaces, such as California or the space between two individuals that is more and more governed by the political and economic forces of the market.

- 14 The market also structures ways of relating to one another like falling in love, as Majewska explores. The flip side of this development is an increased fracturing of space and time. Here, the stratification of cultural practices is important and produces both access and inequalities, with injustices toward gendered and racialized bodies inherent in the activities labelled or enabled by free time. Popular entertainment catering to different social strata established fixed patterns of racism and sexism, thus excluding subjectivities from the masses while at the same time putting them on display. Intertwined with ‘spending time’ in the nineteenth century is a history of the systematic demarcating of class, gender, and race. Entertainment forms, such as minstrel show, which hinged on parody, exploitation, and exaggeration of African Americans, achieved startling popularity. David Nasaw points out that “persons of color were excluded or segregated, [...] also they were overrepresented on stage—as darkies, strutters, and shouters in vaudeville and musical theater; as coons in popular song; as savages in world’s fair exhibits; as buffoons in amusement park concessions; as mascots in baseball parks; as dim-witted children in the early silent movies” (2). Women were understood as prey in entertainment locales and similarly put on display, as David Monod explains—women in sensational theaters from the 1860s onward “were fondled and ogled by men and [...] were constantly solicited for sex” (131). Class (and entertainment targeted to specific classes) was organized by way of ticketing prices and strict spatial segregation in theaters by way of their layouts (i.e., balconies and ranks). Mass entertainment and leisure practices subjected individuals to a rigid temporal dictum of theater schedules, opening hours, train departures, and so on. Inherent in this dictum of organizing the time of *not* working was also that leisure (time) *had* to be put on display, *had* to be enjoyed, *had* to be purchased—while others worked (i.e., the rise of the entertainment industry and the role of working women, for instance, as ‘waiter girls’ in theater spaces).
- 15 Yet there is a sense that ‘free’ is a source of inequality and anxiety, particularly since leisure instigated such contested realignments in the dynamics of time and space. On the [website “Having Fun,”](#) Kay Davis underlines how in rapid changes in transportation, mass media, technological advancements, and urbanization were sources of uneasiness, explaining, “In a time of profound social and cultural change, the increasingly mechanized urban environment left many feeling anxious.” Particularly idleness, in some cases, was simply a display of distinction and class status and accessibility. Thorstein Veblen famously coined the phrase “conspicuous consumption” in his study *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). He argues that social status must be put in evidence; conspicuous leisure—the display of the glories of not working—provides evidence a person does not have to work (practices include wearing

delicate clothing that is free of wear and tear and not wrinkled or sweaty). Inherent in this lies the display of quality, access, and social status. Thus, social class, according to Veblen, sets standards for proper behavior “in point of reputability for the community. The observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in the scale [...]. On pain of forfeiting their good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance” (59). These practices of exclusion are part of the highly problematic and contested concept of *mass* entertainment that allegedly homogenized “masses,” but demonstrate how a specific tier of Americans spent time together while simultaneously excluding others. Therefore, free time brought about the reorganization of temporalities and spaces, but also of politicized bodies that moved through spaces to become recognizable toward each other. As a cultural contested space, leisure time led to “communal fragmentation and privatization. This divisiveness stemmed from leisure’s embeddedness in larger social processes: population increase, ethnic and religious diversification, political change, and economic growth. In one sense, leisure both shaped and was shaped by these developments” (Martin 102). Mass entertainment and leisure practices subjected individuals, as outlined above, to new temporal structures as well as questions of display and status.

- 16 The politics of free time put such relations of inequality as well as of hegemonic dynamics in evidence; leisure time activities (and their codes of conduct) need to be practiced and perpetuated in order to be attained and maintained. Industrialization in the nineteenth century produced both “new types of leisure industry. First, the creation of new wealth and technology gave birth to a taste for novelty. [...] Second, leisure time was transformed by a new sense of time, pleasure by the hour, weekend, and summer holiday, not the traditional festival” (Cross 123). As a brief example for the diversion and possible spatial alleviation of felt anxieties is the phonograph parlor as an early form of public media.[4] Space here was an issue of respectability and less concerned with exclusion, for a democratization of the clientele meant more revenue for the owners. Lisa Gitelman explains that the

*first nickel-in-the-slot machines were located at train stations, then at hotels and drug stores, where [...] an imagined community would have been both diffuse and masculine. A few years later brightly lit arcades promoted as ‘parlors’ were located along busy shopping streets, pedestrian thoroughfares where the imagination could dilate. [...] Customers listened to records through ear tubes, so that this public experience was in another sense a profoundly private one.” (63)*

Gitelman’s historical contextualization of the locales—and their blurring of public and private, as well as (media) time and space—gives us an image of how media of leisure time moved from transient places, like the train station and hotels, into more stable, fixed ones and created locales and (chain) [stores](#).

- 17 The parlors, precursors to what were later called penny arcades, had to look respectable. Inherent in this notion of respectability of the activity and the frequenting of such spaces like phonograph parlors lies, surprisingly, spontaneity: people “did not have to plan in advance to visit the phonograph parlor, but they could drop in—on the way to or from lunch or appointments, or on their way home or to the theater” (Nasaw 126). They were brightly lit and had large windows to signal that these were “establishments with nothing to hide. No reputation would be risked by entering” (126). Leisure consumption could be put on display without disrepute and even be seen from the outside; from a different vantage point, we can think how technological changes spurred changes in social practices and rendered the boundaries between private and public even more blurry. The medium—the phonograph record—similarly helped Americans slowly conceive of themselves as a modern people. Jonathan Sterne points out that time could be repeated and the present became “objectifiable [...] and exchangeable” (11). Leisure, in this sense, might be a symbolic activity performed by social actors in order to become, ultimately, recognizable to each other. Inherent in this is how commercialized free time organized bodies in public and in private anew to see and be seen, and to be looked at—again and again.
- 18 In conclusion, the analytical lens of free time can formulate questions regarding hegemony and power by way of leisure, for leisure was also a

*consciously directed social differentiation. Leisure served exactly this function in the formation of social classes during the early nineteenth century. Socio-economic groups eager to establish social preeminence and display cultural authority used leisure activities in two ways: to promote solidarity and their own sense of identity, and to differentiate themselves from other social formations. (Martin 102)*

Paying attention to free time in American literature, as a mode of literary analysis, is sensitive to questions of class, race, and gender and underscores how power structures shape groups and how individuals internalize shared realities.

- 19 This special issue is the result of a two-day conference, held at Goethe University Frankfurt in February 2020. The conference brought together researchers to discuss the social, political, and aesthetic implications of the emergence of leisure in the nineteenth century. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Linda Hess, Stephan Kuhl, Dr. Maria Sulimma, and Wiebke Kartheus for contributing outstanding talks destined for different publications and writing projects. Dr. Linda Hess focused on the rise of national parks in the United States, which will be part of her second book. Dr. Maria Sulimma discussed coffee as a commodity that has been fundamental for US-American imperialism and colonialism in the Americas—and an innocuous, trivial activity such as drinking coffee can reveal such structures. Stephan Kuhl’s talk on Emily Dickinson incorporated Thorstein Veblen’s theory of leisure as marker of class distinction and compellingly connected Dickinson’s “quasi-public” practices of



leisure with her literary practice. Wiebke Kartheus explored the rise of the museum system in the nineteenth century by way of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, presenting material that is part of her dissertation. Their contributions were invaluable to the conference and I would like to thank them for their participation and feedback. Thanks to the editors of the *American Studies Journal* and the *New American Studies Journal: A Forum* for their help and assistance in compiling this issue.

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## Notes

[1] Julie Rose explains that free time “refers to an idea that is best understood as a resource. This is the idea that the slogan ‘hours for what we will’ captures—it is the time one can spend at one’s discretion, pursuing one’s own ends. It is, in a word, *free* time. Citizens require such time—time not committed to meeting the necessities of life—to pursue their conceptions of the good, whatever those may be” (4).

[2] The [Digital History website](#) explains Commercialized Leisure as follows: “The rise of these new kinds of commercialized amusements radically reshaped the nature of American leisure activities. Earlier in the 19th century leisure activities had been sharply segregated on the basis of gender, class, and ethnicity. The wealthy attended their own exclusive theaters, concert halls, museums, restaurants, and sporting clubs. For the working class, leisure and amusement was rooted in particular ethnic communities and neighborhoods, each with its own saloons, churches, fraternal organizations, and organized sports.”

[3] [Kay Davis’ study about the resort town Newport, RI](#), demonstrates how this American town / resort / vacation destination is one site-specific prism to explore the particular interlacing of class and leisure. Newport as a resort town, Kay Davis explains, attracted mostly people from the east coast—this example helps to provide “insight into American class relations and leisure consumption patterns during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era” (“Newport History”). Davis speaks of patterns, and patterns need to be repeated to manifest themselves: an analysis of this (planned) space demonstrates how self-determination and choice are distributed unequally and might not hinge on free will after all, but on class dynamics and (monetary) access.

[4] The LOC archives early visual recordings of leisure time activities under the title, [“America at Work, America at Leisure: Motion Pictures from 1894 to 1915”](#) that offer a glimpse in both the fascination with media and (free) time

being able to be recorded and hence repeated. In a different archive, the LOC digitized many of Thomas Edison's first recordings, collected under "[Inventing Entertainment: The Early Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings of the Edison Companies.](#)")

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