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# WRITING AMERICA

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# WRITING AMERICA

Literary Landmarks  
from Walden Pond to  
Wounded Knee



A READER'S COMPANION

Shelley Fisher Fishkin

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# WRITING AMERICA



The Welshman's House, built in Hannibal, Missouri, by slaves around 1839, is mentioned by Mark Twain in *Tom Sawyer*. It was saved from demolition, restored, and moved to North Third Street by the Marion County Historical Society, where it now houses Hannibal's newest museum, Jim's Journey: The Huck Finn Freedom Center, at 509 North Third Street. The museum opened in September 2013.

PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTO BY TERRELL DEMPSEY.

# Introduction

## THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only.  
—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Literature, the novelist E. L. Doctorow once observed, “endows places with meaning” by connecting “the visible and the invisible” and finding “the hidden life in the observable life.” And if literature endows places with meaning, places can help us better understand how works of literature came to be what they are. *Writing America* examines intersections between public history and literary history, exploring the physical places that shaped the lives and the art of authors who had a major impact on American literary history as we recognize the field today—sites that their art continues to imbue with meaning.

The physical landscape of American cities and countryside is constantly changing. Buildings deteriorate and decay or are torn down to make way for something new, while open space and places of natural beauty are similarly vulnerable to dramatic transformation over time. The fact that a site is on the National Register of Historic Places does not guarantee that a structure will remain in that location (Mark Twain’s study in Elmira, New York was moved, as was Edgar Allan Poe’s cottage in New York City) or that it will not burn down (the fate of Kate Chopin’s house in Cloutierville, Louisiana). Indeed, some of the sites described in this book may be moved, destroyed, or significantly altered by the time you read this introduction. Being listed on the National Register protects a site only from threats to it that involve the federal government. Nonetheless, there is a slightly higher likelihood that sites listed on the National Register will be preserved in a form that will at least be recognizable to future generations. For this reason, nearly all of the places featured in this book are officially designated National Historic Landmarks,

National Historic Sites, National Historic Monuments, National Historic Districts, National Historic Battlefields, National Historic Trails, or National Parks (the handful that are not officially designated state or city historic landmarks).

Sites appear on the National Register for a range of reasons. They must strike individuals or communities as having sufficient cultural, architectural, or historical significance to warrant preservation; they must retain much of their original character in key physical ways; people who care about them must mobilize to craft proposals to get them listed; and owners must be willing to forgo some of their freedom to make structural changes. Sometimes the links between American literature and National Register sites are clear: houses belonging to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, are on the register because of their connections to these authors. But the dynamics of placing sites on the National Register do not always coincide neatly with the dynamics of producing memorable American literature. What about the literature produced by writers too poor or too transient to have permanent homes capable of being preserved—such as early-twentieth-century writers who were impoverished workers from China or Russia, for example, or late-twentieth-century migrant farm workers in the Southwest? Relegated to the margins of American literature for much of the twentieth century, writers like these—now recognized as important creators of American literature—may still have no sites on the National Register directly connected to them, a fact that made this book especially challenging if I wanted it to reflect the richness and diversity of American literature as we recognize it today.

As Dolores Hayden observed in 1997 in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, in New York and across the country, “centuries of neglect of ethnic history have generated a tide of protest—where are the Native American, African American, Latino, and Asian American landmarks?” The neglect of landmarks associated with working people rather than elites is also a cause for concern, as Hayden reminds us: “The power of place—the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory . . . remains untapped for most working people’s neighborhoods in most American cities, and for most ethnic history and most women’s history.” She adds that “even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance.” Although there has been change in the right direction since Hayden wrote these words, across the country there are still relatively few landmarks associated with people who were not rich, not white, or not male, despite the fact that such people, at any given time in America’s past, together made up the majority of Americans. As of this writing, there are still no homes on the National Register associated with Chicano, Asian American, or Jewish American authors. Rather than limit the scope of this book to

landmarks with obvious literary roots and the writers linked to them, I have pressed into the service of literature sites that are on the National Register for historical, architectural, military, engineering, technological, or religious reasons. In many cases, this book explores their connection to American literature for the first time.

*Writing America* does not aspire to be comprehensive. Only a multivolume work many times its size could do justice to the complexity of the literary heritage of the United States, the physical places that shaped it, and the places that it helps us interpret and understand. Rather than trying to be exhaustive, this book is unabashedly eclectic—a small sampling of people and places that make the literary landscape of the United States so intriguing. I selected the landmarks that anchor each chapter based on their association with writers whose work continues to draw me into its orbit after many readings, or whose work has had a seminal impact on society. I've included a number of selections from the poems, stories, plays, essays, and novels that these writers wrote in order to make the power of their words more immediate. If what you read prompts you to head to the library or the Internet in search of more, that's all to the good; but I saw no need to make you wait until you could get there, preferring to share a sampling of the works right here. I've tried to give a sense of the reach these writers have had, as well—the authors whom they empowered, angered, or inspired—not just in the United States but around the world.

*Writing America* focuses on a wide range of historic sites that have been preserved in enough of their original form to warrant being listed on the register. There are some authors' homes here—but there are also streets, theaters, chapels, schools, docks, plantations, and battlefields; a statue, a body of water, a bicycle shop, a ship, a YMCA, a factory, a hotel, graveyards, internment camps, a lighthouse, and an irrigation pumping station. There are sites in the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, the Northwest, the Southwest, and the West, all of which helped to inspire or serve as the setting of some of the most engaging poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction American writers have produced. More than a hundred sites are included—but there might have been many more. No site made it into the book if it did not serve as a lens through which a significant chapter of literary history might be viewed. Each site had to provide an opportunity to recall, rethink, or revisit literature that mattered to me. In that respect, my choices are, ultimately, quite personal ones.

My motives for writing this book are personal, as well, reflecting the fact that my own first encounter with several of the places discussed here changed my mental map in dramatic ways. My mother's decision to take me to Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut, when I was a child ignited a lifelong fascination with Twain that led me to write two books and fifty-three articles, essays, columns, book chapters, and reviews; edit thirty-three books; coedit two special issues of academic

journals; deliver lectures on four continents; and bring a play he wrote to the Broadway stage. My visit to the Mark Twain Historic District in Hannibal, Missouri, in 1995 prompted me to think long and hard about the ways in which the town's erasure of its slave past—of the role of African Americans in shaping Twain's life and work, and of Mark Twain's biting critiques of American racism after he left Hannibal—echoed America's efforts to bury rather than engage its troubled history of race relations. I became intrigued, as a result, with the broader issues of public memory and public history that this book explores. That memorable first trip to Hannibal also planted the seeds of new courses I developed at Stanford with titles like "Race and Reunion: Slavery and the Civil War in American Memory" and "Re-imagining America: Cultural Memory and Identity since the Civil War."

A trip I took to Paul Laurence Dunbar's home in Dayton, Ohio, in 1999 persuaded me that a reevaluation of Dunbar's place in American letters was long overdue; it kindled an interest in the writer and his work that led me not only to write several articles about him, but also to propose the international conference that took place at Stanford during the year that marked the hundredth anniversary of his death, and to coedit both a new anthology of his writings and a special issue of *African American Review* devoted to reappraising his achievement.

My visit in 2002 to the Angel Island Immigration Station in the San Francisco Bay sparked an interest in the place of Chinese Americans in the national imaginary that has infused my teaching and writing ever since. When I moved to Stanford in 2003, memories of what I saw at Angel Island and what I learned there about the Chinese Exclusion Act impelled me to think about the relative invisibility of the twelve thousand nineteenth-century Chinese laborers whose work on the first transcontinental railroad was key to creating the fortune with which Leland Stanford founded my university. Although their lives have been imagined in fiction, memoir, and drama by many canonical Asian American writers, their voices have been lost, and we know relatively little about their experience. They are now at center of the research project I codirect with my colleague Gordon Chang: the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University, which involves more than a hundred collaborators across North America and Asia in fields including American studies, history, literature, archaeology, anthropology, architecture, digital humanities, and the arts.

The incontrovertible evidence that I have of the ways in which physical places and objects have refocused my own interest in chapters of American literature and of the nation's past, and my recognition of ways in which my understanding of so many poems, stories, novels, essays, and plays has been enriched by an awareness of the places that shaped them compelled me to write this book.

Although different factors shape historic preservation and canon formation, some parallel dynamics come into play. Historic preservation involves decisions about what to preserve or restore, guided by assumptions about why a particular act of preservation or restoration is desirable; these decisions are not unlike those that are always being made about which writers merit inclusion in the literary canon. The stories we tell about the physical structures, material culture, and natural spaces we have preserved or restored fall under the rubric of the public history. The stories we tell about what literature is worth saving and why fall under the rubric of literary history. Both public history and literary history are shaped by the values of the communities that create them. A community's sense of identity, its aspirations, and its insecurities, all help determine what neighborhoods, buildings, and spaces get targeted for preservation. Similar factors shape not only which writers achieve canonical status at any point in time, but which of their works become canonical, as well.

The town of Hannibal, Missouri, for example, is into historic preservation in a big way. Virtually the entire economy of the town runs on Twain tourism. But when I first went there in 1995, the only evidence I could find in the Mark Twain Historic District that Hannibal had been a slaveholding town were two tiny ads for runaway slaves on a page from the *St. Louis Republican* from 1849 that "reached Hannibal when Sam Clemens was 14 years old," on display at Mark Twain's Boyhood Home. At a show presented at the Mark Twain Outdoor Theatre at Clemens Landing that promised to bring to life "in a very special way" episodes from *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Life on the Mississippi*, there was no Jim, no black actor in the cast, and no reference to the fact that slavery had been a prominent institution in both Hannibal and the fictionalized version of it in Twain's novels.

Hannibal, of course, was certainly not alone in its willful neglect of its slave past. As Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small note in *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, the "absence of discussions of the system of slavery or those who had been enslaved" may well be the norm, rather than the exception, at sites that owe their very existence to the slave culture that sustained them. They were unsettled by the degree to which southern plantation museums engaged in what Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, in *Frames of Remembrance*, called "social forgetting." The kind of slavery known in Hannibal was not "the brutal plantation article," as Twain once put it. But it was slavery nonetheless, with its own combination of rapacity, disrespect, disempowerment, and degradation.

Since the powers-that-be in Hannibal did not consider the story of Hannibal's slave past and Twain's reflections on that past to be the kind of feel-good story that encourages tourism, they presented instead a version of nineteenth-century

childhood drawn less from the life that young Sam Clemens led when he lived there than from the saccharine fantasies spun by the master-storyteller who grew up down the road in Marceline, Missouri, in the decades after Twain's death: Walt Disney. While the Mark Twain Historic District erased the black presence in Twain's life and works, the town also erased all signs of the bustling of black-owned businesses that had thrived in segregated Hannibal during the decades after Twain's death. Not surprisingly, the self-appointed guardians of Twain's legacy in Hannibal valued the Twain who wrote *Tom Sawyer* more than the Twain who penned searing critiques of his hometown after he left. They had no use for the Twain who came to see clearly the outrageousness of people who thought of themselves as religious, upstanding citizens buying and selling other human beings; they saw no value in honoring the memory of the Twain whose merciless satires skewered the hypocrisy of a democracy founded by slaveholders on principles of individual liberty.

In Hannibal, as in many places in the country, slavery and segregation may be gone, but the persistence of the racism that allowed both to flourish still makes presenting these chapters of the past challenging and difficult. It strikes many as simpler—and safer—just to forget the whole thing. Hannibal is far from alone in sidestepping painful parts of its past. Michael Kammen notes in *Mystic Chords of Memory* the appeal of nostalgia in sites of public memory across the nation and the “pattern of highly selective memory” that goes with it: “Recall the good but repress the unpleasant.” Hannibal may have been keen about historic preservation, but the history it preferred to preserve, as the director of the Visitors and Convention bureau told me in 1995, involved little boys who “played marbles.” Definitely not little boys sold away from their mothers at the corner of Third and Center Streets. I made Hannibal’s willingness to exploit its connection to Twain while burying both his writings and the world in which he had lived under a barrage of kitsch nostalgic fantasies central to my 1997 book, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*.

A progressive local attorney named Terrell Dempsey, prompted, in part, by reading my book, decided to find out what he could about the history of slavery in Hannibal himself. The groundbreaking volume he published in 2003, *Searching for Jim: Slavery in Sam Clemens’s World*, a book rich with recovered archival materials, offered the powers-that-be a host of new opportunities to tell Hannibal’s story in fresh ways. But neither the town nor the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum was quite ready to seize those opportunities. The same year that Dempsey’s book came out, African American residents of Hannibal erected a granite monument commemorating a significant chapter of Hannibal’s past that no longer existed: the

twenty-three once-thriving black-owned businesses that had been located on the Broadway side of Wedge between 1920 and 1984. The handsome memorial adjacent to the Save-a-Lot parking lot on North Broadway features the names of long-gone barber shops, beauty shops, taverns, taxi companies, social clubs, fraternal organizations, funeral homes, nightclubs, a grocery store, a doctor's office, and a printing company—testimony to the existence of a community with roots in slavery that had survived and thrived despite a history of discrimination and exclusion. But as soon as the monument was in place, some white Hannibal residents waged a protest: what about the white businesses in the area that were no longer there? They erected their own counter-monument across the street, a curiously cryptic little marker “Dedicated to the memory of the businesses of the Wedge and the Market Street Area, 2003.”

Signs of change, however, were in the air. As Regina Faden, a former executive director of the Boyhood Home and Museum notes (in “Presenting Mark Twain”), in response to my criticisms of Hannibal in *Lighting Out for the Territory*, which were increasingly echoed by visitors as well as other scholars, the museum’s board and began “to reevaluate the stories the museum was telling.” But late as 2003–2004, as Faden notes in “Museums and the Story of Slavery,” some board members loudly complained that the Boyhood Home “should not be tainted by the story of slavery.” Faden, who became executive director of the institution in 2004, tells us that in 2005, the complaining board members were overruled, and “several text panels addressing Twain’s experience with slavery in Hannibal” appeared for the first time in the home’s Interpretive Center. That decision “cost the museum the goodwill of its largest donor.” Cindy Lovell, who became executive director in 2008, continued the museum’s efforts to deal with slavery and race more responsibly, giving a talk at a local black church on slavery in Hannibal, for example, and sponsoring workshops to help high school teachers deal with issues of race in Twain’s work. In 2010, a rough pallet—a handmade rug on which Sandy, a young slave who lived with the Clemens family, would have slept—was placed on the kitchen floor in the Boyhood Home.

In 2011, community historian Faye Dant began collecting photographs, newspaper clippings, directories, furniture, clothing, and other artifacts depicting African American life in Hannibal from slavery through the 1950s for an exhibit on “Hannibal African American Life and History” that she curated at the Hannibal History Museum in downtown Hannibal. Over the next two years she tirelessly gathered additional materials from the town’s black residents. She also worked to gain support from the Marion County Historical Society, the Missouri Humanities Council, the Hannibal City Council, and Hannibal’s mayor. Her efforts culminated on September 21, 2013, with the grand opening of a new museum in town—Jim’s

Journey: The Huck Finn Freedom Center. It is now the first building that visitors encounter when they turn off the highway en route to the Mark Twain Historic District. The museum is housed in the old Welshman's House, a one-room stone structure thought to have been built by slaves about 1839, a building that Twain mentions in *Tom Sawyer*. The Marion County Historical Society saved it from demolition and moved it from its original location a few blocks away to its current address at 509 North Third Street.

Dant, the museum's founder and executive director, claims to have been inspired by my books: by my condemnation (in *Lighting Out for the Territory*) of Hannibal's failure to acknowledge its slave past and the town's erasure of those slaves' descendants—hard-working people who raised close-knit families, started businesses, and managed to thrive despite segregation and discrimination—and by my analysis (in *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*) of the key roles African Americans had played in shaping Twain's work, and of Twain's efforts to oppose racism through his writing and through his actions. Dant was determined that the new museum rescue and preserve for future generations the history that the town had ignored, along with neglected aspects of Mark Twain's involvement with African Americans and his efforts to undermine racism.

The museum's grand opening featured a lecture by Larry McCarty, a direct descendant of Daniel Quarles, the slave whose storytelling at the farm where Sam Clemens spent his summers filled young Sam with awe and admiration, and upon whom the character of Jim in *Huck Finn* was partially based. It was presided over by Board President Donald L. Scott, brigadier general (ret.) U.S. Army, a product of Hannibal's once-segregated schools who has served his country in many prominent roles, including that of founding director of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps and deputy librarian and chief operating officer of the Library of Congress.

During the Civil War, the old Welshman's House had been used by Union troops to store munitions. The new museum contained materials that were pretty combustible in their own right: stark emblems of a past that the town had tried to bury, such the signs by which the nation had tried to separate whites from blacks and ensure that the canvas on which its black residents could paint their lives was as constricted as possible: Jim Crow-era signs like "Colored Waiting Room" nestle against the medals and citations testifying to what the town's black residents had achieved despite the obstacles thrown in their way. Outside, a very different sign towers over the small stone building that houses the museum—a huge billboard erected by the Hannibal Visitors Bureau located next door at 505 North Third Street that reads, "Welcome to Historic Hannibal. Write Your Own Story." Writing their own story

is exactly what the black Hannibal residents who donated family photos and letters and mementos to the new museum are trying to do. But will those stories change the stories the town tells about its past?

As of the fall of 2014, the local Twain establishment continued to ignore the new museum. Despite the fact that it is fewer than four blocks from the Boyhood Home, staff there failed to mention it when teachers from across the country arrived for a workshop on teaching *Huck Finn*. The official website of the Hannibal Visitors' Bureau did not include it on its map of attractions. And despite numerous pleas, the sightseeing tours of historic Hannibal that the Hannibal Trolley Company offers visitors every day during the tourist season drive right past the museum but fail to mention it.

While the story the new museum tells is a story in which slavery figures prominently, it does not end with slavery: it is also the story of the racism that persisted long after slavery ended, and persists still—a story that became increasingly important to Mark Twain himself. *Huckleberry Finn* may be a book set during slavery, but it was written decades after slavery had ended: it is a book about racism, a fact that helps account for its continuing relevance to a nation—and world—that still has trouble coming to terms with issues of race. But that story is one that Hannibal still prefers to bury or ignore. “America’s Home Town” is still mainly ruled by Tom Sawyer and kept gleaming with gallons of whitewash.

If questions of local identity and pride make white Hannibal residents “recall the good but repress the unpleasant” (to borrow words Michael Kammen used in another context), national identity and pride may well have had a similar impact on American literary critics’ sense of what they should value in Mark Twain’s work. As Maxwell Geismar put it in *Scanlan’s* in 1970, “During the Cold War era of our culture, mainly in the 1950s although extending back into the ’40s and forward far into the ’60s, Mark Twain was both revived and castrated. The entire arena of Twain’s radical social criticism of the United States—its racism, imperialism, and finance capitalism—has been repressed or conveniently avoided by the so-called Twain scholars precisely because it is so bold, so brilliant, so satirical. And so prophetic.” But while most Americans in the twentieth century had been encountering a “castrated,” tame Twain, to borrow Geismar’s word, readers in China and the Soviet Union were encountering a Twain unafraid to launch salvos at the hypocrisy and failings of the country that he loved.

I have only relatively recently begun to understand the extent to which Mark Twain’s achievement as a writer, and his role as a social and cultural critic, may have been distorted by imperatives of the Cold War. Perhaps in part because Chinese and Soviet writers and critics lauded the Twain who was a searing satirist and

social critic, American writers and critics may have largely dismissed *that Twain* as a figment of the communist propaganda machine and valorized *America's Twain* as a writer to be celebrated primarily as a humorist. The propaganda functions to which Twain's writings were put are obvious; but Americans threw out the baby with the bathwater when they downplayed the validity of Twain's criticisms of his country—which were also criticisms of *their* country. With a few exceptions—most notably work by Philip Foner and Maxwell Geismar—Twain's trenchant critiques of the country he loved tended to be as ignored in the United States at midcentury as they were celebrated in China and the USSR. Only in the 1990s would American scholars generally decide that this aspect of Twain deserved their attention.

The larger point I'm making is that neither historic preservation nor canon formation takes place in a vacuum. The pride—and the prejudices—of the communities doing the preserving shape what places remain for future generations to encounter and what history about those places gets remembered. And the pride—and the prejudices—of the communities constructing the canon shape what literature gets valued and taught. But some fresh perspectives and insights can surface when public history and literary history are thoughtfully brought together.

As we will see, sites that have been preserved for their significance in architectural or religious history or the history of technology can illuminate chapters of literary history in ways that may have never occurred to members of the historic preservation community who worked to get them on the National Register. And by the same token, literary figures never associated with a site—even authors born years after a historic site was restored or preserved and put on the National Register—can shape the narrative of what happened there and how we understand it today in new ways. Teasing out some unexpected links between public history and literary history can allow us to gain fresh perspectives on familiar places and writers; it can also help us appreciate the stories about America that places and writers we may never have met before have to tell.

This book takes an uncomplicated view of physical landmarks by counting as a "landmark" a site that appears on the National Register. But what are "literary landmarks"? The historic preservation community would probably define the term as physical landmarks directly associated with authors or their books, while literary scholars would lean toward a definition involving works of literature that had particular importance in literary history—generally works already widely accepted as having earned a place in the canon. *Writing America* is infused by a much more capacious definition of "literary landmark." Authors discussed in this book include some canonical figures who might have been included in a book about "literary landmarks" half a century ago—Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, Stowe, and Twain,

for example. But it also features many who might not have been there, because their work was not valued then as it is now, at least in part because of the writer's race, ethnicity, or gender. Writers discussed here whose works were absent from earlier generations' rosters of "landmark" authors include Gloria Anzaldúa, Nicholas Black Elk, Abraham Cahan, S. Alice Callahan, Frederick Douglass, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Allen Ginsberg, Jovita González, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Emma Lazarus, John Okada, Américo Paredes, John P. Parker, Tomás Rivera, Morris Rosenfeld, Yoshiko Uchida, Richard Wright, Hisaye Yamamoto, Anzia Yezierska, and many others—as well as contemporary writers who have already left their mark on American letters such as David Bradley, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Rolando Hinojosa, Lawson Fusao Inada, Maxine Hong Kingston, Irena Klepfisz, Genny Lim, N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Wendy Rose, and Tino Villanueva. The writers in this book all figure in the new canons of American literature that are emerging in the twenty-first century, their work increasingly anthologized, read (in the college classroom and beyond), and explored by scholars. This book also recognizes the importance of American literature in languages other than English, including, for example, discussions of poetry and fiction originally written in Spanish, Yiddish, or Chinese. The sometimes quirky and occasionally opinionated interpretations of these writers' work that I present here do not, however, aspire to being "canonical": they are simply my own.

Reading the work of the writers examined in this book can help illuminate the complexities of the physical, social, and cultural landscape that shaped their writing—and encountering that landscape, in turn, can help us gain insight into the nuances and complexities of their art. Each chapter explores what the writers experienced at a particular site, how those experiences shaped their art, what the visitor may see there today, and how the tensions and energies surrounding the site today resonate with aspects of what these writers experienced and evoked. To convey some of the broader traditions and trajectories of American literature emanating from these places, each chapter radiates beyond the writers associated with the main anchor site to later writers influenced by them, as well, suggesting how the writers' legacies continue to have an impact on American letters. Although it is the product of years of research, *Writing America* wears its scholarship lightly. The selected readings at the end of each chapter will point readers to the voluminous scholarship on which this book builds, and without which it would not have been possible—scholarship in American literature and American history, in material culture studies, architectural history, and museum studies.

Sometimes the physical place and the literature are so intimately connected as to be inseparable. The Chinese poems carved on the walls of the Angel Island

Immigration Station in the San Francisco Bay, for example, or the poem by Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” engraved on a plaque inside the base of the Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbor are two such cases (although in Lazarus’s case, the association began twenty years after the poem was written). At other times, the link is less direct. The historic irrigation pumping station in Hidalgo, Texas, propelled the water into the fields that poet-essayist Gloria Anzaldúa worked in as a child and later wrote about in searing, powerful essays and poems; the Tenement Museum in New York City was not unlike the nearby tenement in which novelist Anzia Yezierska grew up, and which played such a key role in her fiction.

Sometimes a place owes its very existence to literature: the houses I discuss that belonged to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, were literally built with what these successful authors earned from the sales of their books. Sometimes a place owes its preservation to the literature that helped teach us to value it: naturalist John Muir, for example, who did so much to ensure that future generations would be able to see what he saw at Yosemite and other sites of natural beauty, and whose work laid the foundation for the creation of the National Park Service, drew much of his inspiration from early readings of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nearly a century later, Thoreau’s book inspired a group of prominent musicians, authors, actors, and activists to work to ensure that the woods surrounding Walden Pond itself were saved from development.

If literature has played a role in teaching us to value parts of the physical world, the physical world has also played a role in helping us understand aspects of literature. I was unprepared for some of the lessons that architecture and artifact taught me about the literary past as I researched this book. I was surprised by the resonances between the humble materials and careful carpentry of Walt Whitman’s birthplace home and the poems the poet would go on to write. I was struck by the ways in which the exotic architecture along Hollywood Boulevard that cavalierly made all the cultures of the world its own reflected the tendency of so many films made there to turn ethnic and racial “others” into stereotyped creatures of the imagination as far from real people as Grauman’s Chinese Theatre was from China—a tendency that inspired writers from some of those ethnic and racial groups to set the record straight with poetry and fiction of their own. I hadn’t expected to find the mélange of Spanish, Mexican, Anglo, and German architectural elements in buildings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley to be such an apt metaphor for the cultural hybridity that is such a central theme in the poetry and fiction produced there. Nor had I imagined that a sugar bowl in Sinclair Lewis’s Minnesota boyhood home would evoke the significance of the history that helped make Lewis who he was—or that a bathroom in a Lower East Side tenement building would shed the

light it did on Anzia Yezierska's first reaction to Hollywood. And I certainly hadn't expected to gain new insight into the racial politics of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry from a distinctive piece of furniture his mother kept in the home he purchased for the two of them in Dayton, Ohio.

Places, like works of literature, are open to multiple interpretations. The "meanings" of places and of literature are sometimes hotly contested. The significance of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, for example, to the people who live there may have little to do with the town's significance in the national imagination as a result of Sinclair Lewis's writings; and people still argue over what word to use to describe an event that happened at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, more than a century ago. While this book uses historical sites as windows on literary history, it also uses literature as way of framing, interpreting, and understanding the social, political, and cultural meanings of physical places.

In the chapters that follow, we will see the New Bedford Historic Whaling District through the work of two nineteenth-century writers for whom it was a temporary home, Herman Melville and Frederick Douglass, and we will explore Hannibal, Missouri, through the writings of Mark Twain. We will view the Hollywood Boulevard Historic District that Nathanael West, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Raymond Chandler encountered. We will watch what transpired at the Angel Island Immigration Station through Genny Lim's drama that takes place there. We will view the Schomburg Library in Harlem through the eyes of Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen, and we will see historic districts of the Lower Rio Grande Valley through the eyes of writers born and raised there—Américo Paredes, Tomás Rivera, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jovita González, Jovita Idár, and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith. We will hear what happened in 1890 at Wounded Knee from Black Elk, who was there and saw it himself; from S. Alice Callahan, who tried to make sense of it in a novel she published a year later; from Vine Deloria, who was taken there as a child; from Mary Crow Dog, who helped seize and occupy the site in 1973; and from poets N. Scott Momaday, who was moved by a hundred-year-old photograph of the dead, and Wendy Rose, who saw artifacts connected with the massacre in an auction catalog.

When we go to these sites today, we can still encounter some of the tensions reflected in what these writers wrote about them. The racism exposed and condemned by Mark Twain, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Gloria Anzaldúa has still not been eradicated. One can grasp more fully the roots of these writers' frustration and despair in visits to the locales that shaped their art—in Hannibal, Missouri, which still largely erases the place of slavery in its past, and downplays Mark Twain's role as an antiracist writer; in Dayton, Ohio, which instead of celebrating the interracial adolescent friendship of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Wright brothers, ignores

it almost entirely; and in the Rio Grande Valley, where the disregard for Mexican farm workers' health and well-being that cut short the life of Anzaldúa's father continues to curtail the life expectancies of the people who pick the fruit and vegetables that appear on our dinner tables.

Visits to these sites can help us think about questions that are as unresolved today as they were when these writers wrote about them. A trip to the Angel Island Immigration Station, or the Statue of Liberty, or Wounded Knee, or the Original Main Street or the Roma Historic District, or Angel Island, or Manzanar can help us think about questions like: Who is an American? What is an American? What unites us? What divides us? Who and what are still left out of the nation's narratives of who and what we are, and where we came from? What counternarratives are erased and suppressed in public spaces? Who gets to tell our public stories? Whose voices get silenced? Who gets heard? I hope this book will stimulate you to think about these questions, as it leads you to physical places and imaginative terrains that reflect and refract each other in ways that cast unexpected lights and shadows on the alchemy by which American writers have transformed the world around them into art, changing their world and ours in the process.

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