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978-0-521-49750-3 - Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation

Sara Blair

Excerpt

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## Introduction

*MAKING A DIFFERENCE: HENRY  
JAMES, LITERARY CULTURE, AND  
RACIAL THEATER*

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In the first volume of his autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), Henry James meditates at length on the paths to culture blazed in that most idiosyncratic of academies, the James family itself. Although he details his “exposure” to a host of American cultural resources – vaudeville, circus spectacles, sentimental drama, family reading circles, lamplit slide shows, lyceum lectures – he reserves his most highly wrought prose for a certain version of American theater. Figuring himself in the act of “gaping” at rickety billboards along lower Fifth Avenue that advertise P. T. Barnum’s Great American Museum, he passes metonymically from their brisk “blazonry” to the person of “Miss Emily Mestayer,” playing the role of Eliza in Barnum’s production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (*SBO* 90–2). Despite her appearance – “red in the face” and “hoo[k]-nose[d]” – the popular actress in this most spectacularly popular of dramas wears “the very complexion of romance” for the American *littérateur*-in-training; even more importantly, her performance provides a benchmark against which James can measure his own acquisition of the faculty of critical distinction. Viewing another production of Stowe at a lower East side playhouse shunned by “fashion and culture,” he can compare renditions of “the tragi-comical Topsy” and “the blonde Eva . . . of pantalettes and pigtails.” The ability thus to distinguish constitutes his “great initiation” not only into the culture-building power of the theater but into the precincts of “culture” itself: “I could know we had all intellectually condescended” in having had “the thrill” of such “an aesthetic adventure,” he notes, but the adventure itself “was a brave beginning for a consciousness that was to be nothing if not mixed” (*SBO* 94–5).

Of most urgent interest in this passage on American theater is the productive conjunction of signifiers for national identity, cul-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 HENRY JAMES AND THE WRITING OF RACE AND NATION

tural styles, and race. Even as James's metonymic figures performatively enact a certain, indubitably Jamesian, version of "culture" over and against that of the "Anglo-Saxon millions," they nonetheless reveal his artful self-representation to be composed of various sorts of "mixture" and exchange: between the high or "polite" and the low, condescension and adventure, "appetite" and "appreciation," the aesthetically "rich" and the "vulgar," the "slave girl" and "her little mistress" (*SBO* 93–5). Far from recoiling in face of "the shock" of such "opposed forces" (*SBO* 94), James reading Mestayer reading Barnum reading Stowe makes his "memory" of the culture of the theater serve his representation of the theatricality of culture itself – or more precisely, of the open-ended dynamic of contestation and exchange through which "our Anglo-Saxon taste," the fitfully racialized and nationalized property of an earlier cultural moment, is acquired and sated (*SBO* 64). The theater, like James's act of memory and self-memorializing, becomes a "stage of culture" on which varied gestures of national, racial, and cultural identification can be distinguished and rehearsed (*SBO* 94).

This book takes as its object of study the range of such gestures throughout James's renderings of culture and cultural performances alike. At large, I argue two claims: that texts over the range of his career productively negotiate the race thinking and nation-building habits and institutions of emergent modern Anglo-America, in varied Victorian, gilded age, fin de siècle, and late capitalist formations; and that his "mixed" performances of what has recently come to be studied as whiteness<sup>1</sup> – that is to say, constructions of American and Anglo-American masculinity, gentility, and a putative Anglo-Saxon racial identity – not only register but extend the range of available responses to American racial history in his moment and in our own. These claims will undoubtedly strike some readers of James as well as readers generally skeptical about canonical engagements, to borrow a Jamesian locution, as queer or misplaced. But it is, I contend, precisely because James's *oeuvre* has been so long condemned for a mandarin insularity, relegated to a rarefied realm of aggressively high cultural striving, that attention to its engagements with the subject of race thinking in numerous cultural sites proves so rewarding. With a continuity obscured by the local color line drawn between his "English" and "American" productions, and by the boundary laid down between masterfully "proportioned" texts and those less successfully formalist (*AN* 52), James's intricately self-conscious declarations of cultural identity negotiate widely disparate resources, particularly idioms alive in popular culture. Miming and mining the latter, many of his literary performances energetically

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[More information](#)

endeavor – sometimes successfully, other times markedly less so – to transform the sites of cultural exchange they occupy, which are always simultaneously sites of James's acts of self-representation.

In the rich range of such attempted transformations, James offers exemplary evidence for the centrality and power with which high literary culture, in dialogue with disciplinary and popular modes of nation-building, conducted race work in Anglo-America during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Apparently local and idiomatic skirmishes over literary doctrine, genre formation, and professional authority become, his work attests, sites in which canons of national, class, and broadly racial taste, "type," and "character" take definitively modern shape. These performances, far from insular or merely dismissive of material culture, share, redirect, and revitalize the broadly racial fantasies and energies of popular texts, ranging from photography, romantic travel narratives, ethnographic studies, minstrelsy, and yellow journalism to the iconography of the industrial city. Borrowing from these arenas of racial production and exchange such figures as the atavistic Italian, the Negro servant, the culturally exhausted European, the Jewish usurer, and even the 100 percent American, James constructs a literary "internationalism" through which definitively national and racial feelings, aspirations, and characterologies are elaborated and transfigured.

To read as such James's contestatory engagements with other kinds of cultural narratives not only evidences the complexity of literature's nation-building or civic habits. It also argues for the evolving value of work on canonical texts, indeed, on master texts and on the institution known as literary mastery, in the critical study of race. My principal project is the reading of James's works – their cultural politics, their representational strategies, their negotiation of emerging distinctions between high and low, nation and literary nationality – relocated in sites of racial production and exchange onto which they open. In this general intention, I participate in a wider reevaluation of James's art, and its continuing importance to understandings of the aesthetic, material, and political cultures of modernity.<sup>2</sup> But I also argue that the literary itself, and the widely varied performances comprehending that sphere, is a crucially important site of racial formation, in and through which distinctly American, Anglo-American, and "Anglo-Saxon" racial feelings, entangled with the pursuit of taste and the cultural good, evolve.

My project is consequently in dialogue, and perhaps productive tension, with certain trends in the thinking of race, particularly in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 HENRY JAMES AND THE WRITING OF RACE AND NATION

the field of cultural studies. That discipline has largely treated race, racism, and racial matters by way of theorizing the production of subordinate groups within contemporary capitalism and its encodings of cultural power, taking popular or mass culture as the most richly imbricated site of race's affective life.<sup>3</sup> This overdetermined move to privilege the popular as a site for the study of cultural habits and transformations has, among other effects, provided a powerful corrective to the conceptual excesses of cultural theory under the banner of the Frankfurt School, in which high culture became hypostatized as a unique site of resistance to a cultural logic of dehumanization instanced by mass entertainment.<sup>4</sup> But it has also left largely unattended the problem of genteel or middle-class institutions – literature being exemplary – as a crucial, volatile resource and site for fluid forms of racial and national filiation. Inverting an over-determined distinction between high and low cultures, focusing on the low as the site of production of authentic or counterhegemonic cultural narratives, the drift of cultural studies has paradoxically been to preserve the high in its own terms as the aestheticized, differently ordained zone of social meaning-creation it advertises itself, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to be.

The cultural force of high culture is further problematized in scholarship in the texts of post-coloniality and imperialist culture, which has tended to reify the literary, and particularly the book-cum-instrumental cultural object, as a primary (and indeed primal) site of ideological reproduction, colonizing, and policing. Tales of romance constitute “adventure . . . indistinguishable from surveillance”; the “rhetorical procedures” of literature, continuous with those of colonialist journalism, constitute a “repertoire” of techniques for the interpellation of colonial subjects; literary practice equates with forms of “existential practice,” in which “the space of an Other” of discourse and power – over and against which the self and realm of value of modernity are recuperated – is created.<sup>5</sup> But as Homi Bhabha has influentially argued, the tacit premise of such readings – “the commonplace that the institution of literature works” unremittingly to nationalist or colonialist ends<sup>6</sup> – has obscured the cultural specificity and the performativity of varied, nuanced gestures of literary nationality and filiation, as well as “a particular ambivalence that haunts” postcolonial culture-building, its forms of “address,” and “the language of those who write it and the lives of those who live it” (Bhabha 1990, 1, 3). Mindful of such differently situated work, my study seeks locally to recover the complex interaction of high literary culture with its repressed, illegiti-

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[More information](#)

mate, or disowned resources for the formation of racial feeling.<sup>7</sup> In part, I study James's vexatiously genteel masks and his inversive mimicries so as to consider shifting literary responses to narrative and social challenges from "below" or "elsewhere" as broadly racial performances, embattled in the formation of culture as, in E.P. Thompson's salient phrase, a whole way of conflict.

The notion of performativity that has been so important for Bhabha and other scholars elaborating the condition of postcoloniality is of particular importance to this project, not least because it so aptly registers the complexity of James's racial figures, which tend to hover between metaphor and historical fact.<sup>8</sup> Numerous studies have documented the increasing theatricality of James's self-representations, and his critical uses of a "dramatic analogy" between the theater and fiction as institutions distanced from "social facts" (*AN* 165), capable of fostering, in Victor Turner's well-known argument, a kind of liminoid experience (Turner, 282).<sup>9</sup> Recent work in American material culture has also measured James's fiction against the urgent theatricality and highly spectacular forms of nineteenth-century American social experience, where, the argument goes, highbrow literature increasingly struggles against but unwittingly assists in producing the commodified, theatricalized subject of advertising and conspicuous consumption.<sup>10</sup> In my project, these largely figural versions of social theater buttress a more focused argument to the performative character of racial and national identity and of James's interventions therein. Scholars of racial production and interaction have recently urged flexible attention to the shifting, rather than merely or straightforwardly dominative, force of participation in particular racial cultures or contexts, ranging from turn-of-the-century American burlesque to contemporary Anglo-American film and the antebellum minstrel show (Allen, Hall, Lott). The high literary culture so powerfully aligned with and by James is no less messy and no less multiple in its designs on its readership. Rehearsing culturally specific idioms, James's strategic allegiances to British, American, Anglo-European, and other fluidly constituted cultural communities and icons register the discursive repertoires of whiteness, as well as the anxieties of national identity that attend its very mobility. With recourse to a broad range of symbolic gestures of racial identification, anxiety, fantasy, and restraint, James's texts work contextually both to preserve and to exploit the inherent instability of racial identity in the era of modernity. Their effect is not, I argue, to consolidate a reified literary "power," writ in the habits and values of high gentility, so

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

much as to offer competing tales of the tribe: to dramatize, at least intermittently, the consequences of ritual gestures of broadly racial identification, naming, and exclusion.

At large, I understand the literary culture James is instrumental in transforming as a theater of such operations, a social and psychic space in which performances of race and nation are produced, managed, rehearsed, and variously put on. Indeed, it can be argued that James's canon provides a unique opportunity for rethinking the literary and literary critical production in those formations. Within American Studies, whose precincts James has occupied both centrally and uneasily, his critical reception has been intimately entangled with historically charged terms of race and nation whose shifting meaning the aura of James's mastery has given his readers permission to put under erasure. What does it signify that James's canon has been taxonomized and divided into nationalized canons and periods – the “very American” novels and tales of the 1880s, the distinctly “English” society fiction of the middle years, the “American criticism” of the Victorian *Weltanschauung*, the “very English” genius of the early master texts, no less than the transnational fiction of the master phase – such that, as Richard Brodhead has noted, “we discuss his career as we do national traditions, in terms of periods of artistic style and artistic project”?<sup>11</sup> What particular performances in James's texts have given rise to studies with such suggestive titles as *The American Henry James*, *An American as Modernist*, *The French Side of Henry James*, and *The Cosmopolitan World of Henry James*, or to readings that critically or implicitly engage the activity of nation-building in the making of literary canons and genealogies?<sup>12</sup> (I think particularly here of Philip Rahv's resonant distinction between American “redskins” and “palefaces,” the latter exemplified by James, and of R. W. B. Lewis's American Adam, described as “the hero of a new adventure, an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race” [Lewis, 5]; I think, too, of Van Wyck Brooks's quite different sense, articulated in the moment of greatest influence for such American nativists as Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant, of James as failed American, seeking compensation in a hermetic aestheticism for a failed sense of nation-bound “history.”) A matter of equal curiosity is the absence of notable account in the evolving historiography of American Studies of how James's signature production of such cultural objects as the American Girl, the international marriage, and the cosmopolitan imagination has provided terms for the critical elaboration of definitively American structures of feel-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ing, cultural aspirations, and characterologies. Instrumental to the cultural politics of the New Criticism as well as the liberal left, the James canon has underwritten American self-representation throughout the twentieth century, conducted in the negotiation of shifting ideas of nation, literary nationality, transnationality, and (more complexly) race.

Sustained treatment of James's entitling function within the changing precincts and mission of literary studies falls outside the limits of my project. But even this brief survey of the terms of his reception suggests how clearly his performances open a lens onto the instability of race – and particularly of whiteness – as a shifting structure of experience and feeling (and of commodification, violence, and repression). What makes these richly gestural forms of culture-building possible is James's aggressive capitalization on lines of parallel but uneven development in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American race thinking. In both disciplinary and popular contexts James engages, categories of descent – “blood,” “stock,” “tribe” – are increasingly overlaid with, and radically confused by, general terms of classification – “species” or “kind” – as well as assignments of nation.<sup>13</sup> Ernest Renan, a subject of James's wide-ranging cultural criticism (and a central figure in recent studies of nation and race), would argue in 1882 that such classificatory discourses were premised on a “grav[e] mistake”: “race is confused with nation and a sovereignty analogous to that of really existing people is attributed to ethnographic or . . . linguistic groups” (Renan, 8). Renan's monitory argument documents the practices of early anthropology which, in dialogue with the emergent field of linguistics, virtually invented such typological categories as the “Nordic” strain, the Anglo-Saxon “pure stock,” and, most infamously, the “Aryan.” As a result, by late century highly dissonant terms of descent and origin had become “semantically interchangeable” (S. Anderson, 19). In innumerable theoretical and popular texts charting the progress, nature, and decline of the Anglo-Saxon, “[p]hysical, cultural and socio-economic differences” were “taken up, projected and generalized,” “so confused that different kinds of variation” – nation, language, genus, class – were “made to stand for” one another (Williams, 250).

As the passage from *A Small Boy* evidences, it is James's peculiar genius to exploit this power of social figuration to notably varied ends, including the creation of the cross-cultural marriage plot through which forms of racial and national identity are tested and the seizure of an English novelistic tradition for an Anglo-American cultural province in which distinctly literary mastery will hold

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 HENRY JAMES AND THE WRITING OF RACE AND NATION

sway. Transforming the fraught emptiness of race's signifying terms as a form of modernist capital, James contextually adopts alternative gestures, of ironic gentility, of "queerness," of identification with racial others, so as to reframe the cultural subject's relation to culture-building. These performances evidence the currency of race as a dramatically shifting signifier, whose every instantiation – in high literary notions of an Anglo-Saxon cultural inheritance or a uniquely American cultural purchase, in arguments to citizenship and British immigration law, in popular representations of racial purity and danger – performs a different social meaning. To read James's postures of culture-building as such is thus to begin to reconsider how each such act of figuration extends or redirects the reach of racial terms, reconfigures, in Benedict Anderson's famous phrase, the imagined communities of America and Anglo-America.<sup>14</sup>

While my understanding of James's signature idiom of culture as a form of racial theater represents a departure from previous scholarship, reading his work under the sign of performance is hardly original. In fact, arguments to the performative force of James's formalism – his vauntedly difficult style, his literary "architecture," his epistemological dramaturgy – have been central from the outset to both American and British canonizations of James.<sup>15</sup> But the James of my study is less straightforwardly canonical, a writer in dialogue, in effect, with his own developing, increasingly commodifiable literary and cultural mastery. It would surely be productive to consider the historically salient kinds of race thinking entertained in the very works James names as master texts, as a number of readers have begun to do. Milly Theale's entry into Lancaster Gate in *The Wings of the Dove* is, after all, a scrupulously calibrated drama of nationalized sensibility, in which the very "sound of words," the "denotements" and performances of class identity, enact and challenge "possibilities" of "type" read through the focused lens of Milly's own American "race" (*NYE* 19:148, 153). Likewise, *The Golden Bowl* can be taken as James's meditation on the twentieth-century project of cultural assimilation, conducted within the conventions of the marriage plot; there, the very condition of possibility for cosmopolitan assimilation itself is none other than New World capital, crucially backed by the cultural capital of the pawnbroking, racially transgressive, problematically assimilated Jew.<sup>16</sup> And in the prefaces to the New York Edition, James works to invent another "state of things" – that is, both a state of mind and a version of the civic or nation-state – in which fiction does the hard labor of transfiguring race and nation as categorical imperatives, mapping a psychic geog-



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

raphy of continuously social, universally human “relations.” For *this* James, the “very condition” of both literary modernism and American liberal modernity is the supercession of any racialized national identity “whatever” (AN 5, 200).

But these master texts achieve their version of culture-building precisely by erasing their tracks; their strenuously subtle performances of Anglo-American “character” and gentility assist in their own detachment from the historical conditions in and through which racial and national identities are historically being forged. Taking up more openly (if not more self-consciously) performative work, I put deliberate emphasis on the continuities of James’s writings with popular texts, and on the discontinuities – the shifts and strategems, the gestural richness – of their identifications with varying racial and national forms. The resulting array of James’s “productions,” in his own word, ranges from early apprentice criticism and travelogue, canonical declarations of formalist literary doctrine, and problematic engagements with realism, through his novelistic negotiations of distinctively English and American cultural canons, to the differently articulate racial performances of *The American Scene*. My central principle of organization is instrumental rather than generic or literary historical: I mean to forestall a reading of race or nationhood as a thematic “problem,” exhausted by or within the developing conventions of James’s formalism, as well as a reading that refuses any social currency to the literary gestures that comprise that formalism. Consequently, I have posited an other-than-canonical James, one who engages in sometimes tense if fluent exchange with the shifting currency of nation and race, and who variously and contextually works to construct a cultural subject unbound from laws of Anglo-Saxon “nature,” liberated into a problematically, peculiarly “internationalist” or “cosmopolitan” state of reception and response.

My study thus begins with a body of James’s early writings virtually untreated by his critical readers, but generative of a developing internationalist ethos through which the powers and restraints of Anglo-Saxon and bourgeois mastery are productively contravened. Between 1865 and 1875, James published literally scores of reviews, “notices,” and essays, the majority of them in the *Nation*, predominantly concerned with national cultures and characters and texts of leisure or anthropological expedition. Mostly unattributed, they have in effect been dismissed as journeyman pieces of “great charm,” produced by a “light, humorous” pen that blithely “race[d] along.” Read in the context of emergent forms of Anglo-American racial theater, however, these texts turn out to be far more pur-

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Sara Blair

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 HENRY JAMES AND THE WRITING OF RACE AND NATION

positively raced than “carefree” (Edel, *Conquest* 186). Their unifying concern is none other than the culturally productive effects of racial contact and exchange, staged in the “first impressions” of genteel travelers in haunts of difference ranging from urban Paris to Lake Bangweolo and Kathmandu. More precisely, these texts of James’s own first impressions – whereby he begins to position himself with respect to variously American, English, continental, genteel, and urban publics – open out onto a fluid body of scientific and popular ethnographic texts traversed by strong currents of post-Darwinian anxiety about racial definition and taxonomy. Mobilizing an ethnographic imaginary of contact and transgression, James hazards alternatively internationalist styles of response, through which the values of genteel masculinity and racial virility are subjected to the “perpetual friction” of alternative forms of pleasure and power (AA 210; *LCI* 822).

In James’s terms, this kind of racial theater – what we might call, with respect to his orientaling idiom, the unmooring of racial and national affect from the project of cultural mastery – is enacted in “the aimless *flânerie* which leaves you free to follow capriciously every hint of entertainment” (*IH* 149). In more closely American contexts, the conspicuously Jamesian idiom of freedom is put in service of quite different projects, to which I turn in chapter two. In 1883, following on the acclaim awarded his *Portrait of a Lady* and in anticipation of the appearance of the first collective edition of his fiction, James undertook a reassessment of the novel as a national institution. The resulting essays of literary doctrine included “Anthony Trollope,” which appeared in the *Century* of July 1883, and “The Art of Fiction,” published in *Longman’s* in September of 1884. In these venues of cultural aspiration – the first American, the latter British – James’s critical rhetoric of freedom acquires a certain urgency, becoming newly central to his performative negotiations of race and nation. Assimilated under the standard of literary realism, both essays entertain a highly charged idiom of “Anglo-Saxon” racial character and destiny so as to promote the novel as a vehicle of cultural – rather than strictly racial – renewal. Redirecting freedom – freedom of movement, of association, of expression, of feeling – as an Anglo-Saxon property whose vitality and survival must be ensured, James franchises the English novel for emergent American traditions and argues for the instrumentality of high culture to modern civic life. Cognate texts, the two essays work to consolidate James’s internationalism, staking his claim as heir to the English novel within an idiom of American self-determination, negotiating