The Troubled Union
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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Writing a series of commentaries titled “American Letters” for the British periodical *Literature* at the height of the Spanish-American War, Henry James complained in “The American Novel of Dialect” that “[n]othing is more striking, in fact, than the invasive part played by the element of dialect in the subject-matter of the American fiction of the day” (699). Even as an overseas American Empire was coming to fruition, James fretfully addressed the question cultural difference might have upon national culture. Commenting that Edward Townsend's 1895 novel *Chimmie Fadden* consisted of the “very riot of the abnormal—the dialect of the New York newsboy and bootblack,” James bemoaned the extent to which the aesthetics of fiction had been reduced to the mere “cleverness” of a mimetic transcription of “modernity, of contemporary newspaperese” (700; 698). Much to James's dismay, undiscriminating readers encouraged this trend by voraciously consuming novels of dialect. While novels of dialect might be bestsellers, James continued, these “great successes are not the studies of the human plant under cultivation” (700). Rather than reproducing the proper language through which U.S. letters would accurately reflect a refined national civilization, popular novels perpetuated dialect and thus authorized questionable differences of class, race, and gender in the American republic.

As the United States approached the twentieth century, James’s sentiment that the aesthetic standards of national culture were being undermined by the dynamics of the mass reading market reflects his anxieties
about the tenuous sense of national inheritance. Upon its surface, James’s
diatribe against a philistine mass culture in the “The American Novel of
Dialect” has the familiar ring of Jamesian insistence upon the complete
autonomy of high cultural aesthetics. Yet at the very moment of U.S. impe-
rial expansion that heralded the dawn of the American Century, James’s
comments about dialect are not so much disconnected from the political,
economic, and racial dynamics of that imperialism but rather an anxious
claim to aesthetic autonomy in the name of the never completed project
of Anglo-American cultural renewal. James’s splenetic comments about
the novel of dialect reflect not just his preoccupation with the United
States’s lack of cultural resources vis-à-vis “Europe” but also the uneasy
consequences of imperialist nation building for the sense of U.S. nation-
hood itself. James’s cultural project of national renewal through the novel
inhabits (even as it reinvents) the transnational racial category of Anglo-
American civilization, following the imperial logic by which national bor-
ders might fluctuate but correspondingly through which whiteness as a
marker of colonial difference could be continuously remade.¹

Usually situated in a cosmopolitan, transatlantic context, James has
seldom been considered a theorist, or even proponent, of U.S. nationalism
and its imperialist practices. Much more common has been the critical
sense of James as being, if anything, “anti-American” in his geographic
and aesthetic positioning after his 1875 transatlantic migration to Europe.
Writing upon the occasion of James’s death, T. S. Eliot suggested that
James’s commitment to the very principle of the nation, much less to the
particular nation called the United States, stood on precarious ground: “It
is the final perfection, the consummation of an American to become not
an Englishman, but a European, something which no born European, no
person of any European nationality can become” (855). James’s brother
William would similarly place him outside the realm of nationality alto-
gether, remarking, “He’s really, I won’t say a Yankee, but a native of the
James family, and has no other country” (qtd. in Matthiessen 303).

However, the critical emphasis upon James as a Europeanized expatri-
ate has obscured his deep engagement, aesthetic and otherwise, with U.S.
social relations. If literary scholars have traditionally interpreted James-
ian formal complexity as solely aesthetic and not as the socially embed-
ded figurations of Lionel Trilling’s more relational “restless analyst,” then
neither view takes James’s seeming indifference to portrayals of “race” or
to the context of late nineteenth-century imperialism as anything other
than that.² Consequently, that Toni Morrison should name “Henry James
scholarship” as the prime example of the “willed scholarly indifference” to the ghostly literary presence of the U.S. imperial project seems only appropriate (13). Heeding Morrison’s call to excavate the Jamesian entanglement with the cultures of U.S. imperialism, more recent scholarship by Sara Blair, Walter Benn Michaels, Ross Posnock, and Kenneth Warren have shown how James’s literary aesthetics variously negotiated the social complexities of the late nineteenth-century world.

Far from positing a sphere of pure art, Jamesian realism participated within contested ideological transformations of imperial racial formations; in Warren’s words, “racial concerns shaped James’s aesthetic even when his texts were not specifically ‘about’ race in any substantive way” (12). Insofar as “race” and “culture” were inextricably linked in the logic of imperialism during the Age of Empire, the proper reproduction of the latter inevitably invoked anxieties about the reproduction of the former. As Jonathan Freedman has noted on James’s relation to U.S. nationalism, “The translation of empire . . . is one with the transmission of culture,” particularly for a nation that “had in his youth been rent asunder in the Civil War and was struggling in his middle years to reconstruct itself on a new, imperial model” (7–8). This becomes most apparent in James’s commentary on dialect in U.S. novels at the moment of the U.S.-Spanish War, where James explicitly argued for the racial implications of that specific realist narrative strategy for the making of a U.S. national civilization. A reconsideration of dialect’s functioning within Jamesian aesthetics results in a significantly revised understanding of the relationship James posits between realism, imperialism, and national identity.

At odds with conservative white supremacist writers such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page as well as liberal advocates of black civil rights such as Mark Twain and George Washington Cable, James repudiated the increasingly popular use of dialect in the nation’s metropolitan magazines such as Century Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s Weekly, and the North American Review during the 1880s. When The Bostonians began its thirteen-month serial run in the February 1885 issue of Century Magazine, the narrative shared the pages with Joel Chandler Harris’s renditions of antebellum plantation songs as well as selections from Twain’s just-published subscription novel, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. While far from being assured the importance in U.S. literary history that Ernest Hemingway would later assign to it, Huckleberry Finn garnered praise not only for its dialect in conversations between its characters, but also for its adoption of dialect for the point
of view. Although the trustees of the Concord (New Hampshire) Public Library banned the novel in March 1885 on the grounds that “it is couched in the language of a rough, ignorant dialect,” most reviewers praised its use of dialect as, in the words of plantation dialect writer Harris, “the most original contribution that has yet been made to American literature” (qtd. in Fischer 16; Harris 4).

As Michael North has noted, the black dialect employed by white writers such as Harris helped construct the post-Reconstruction myth of harmonious race relations between planters and slaves, a useful construct with which to demonize the freedmen and to legitimate Jim Crow and white supremacy. So despite the implied racial egalitarianism of Twain’s narrative, even staunch white Southern ideologues such as Harris embraced the liberal use of dialect within *Huckleberry Finn*. Responding in an *Atlanta Constitution* editorial to the library ban, Harris defended *Huckleberry Finn*, calling it “an almost artistically perfect picture of life and character in the southwest . . . equally valuable to the historian and to the student of sociology” (4). In appealing to sociological and historical grounds as well as aesthetic ones for the use of dialect (including his own), Harris invoked the authority of newly professionalized disciplines that self-consciously involved themselves in excavating a racialized genealogy of national civilization. The use of American dialects distinguished U.S. writing from other national traditions; by transcending the manifestly political content of any text, dialect in effect became the literary sign of the United States itself.

James’s response to dialect, “The American Novel of Dialect,” situates the development of a high cultural aesthetic in apparent opposition to the uncertain effects of imperial nation building, the results of which included culturally marginal populations and the mass culture that catered to them. For James, the U.S. novel of dialect challenged the very possibility of aesthetic production, begging “the question of the possible bearing, on the art of the representation of manners, of the predominance more and more enjoyed by the representation of those particular manners with which dialect is intimately allied.” In carelessly participating within the economic dictates of mass culture, U.S. novelists had allowed the representational strategy of dialect to determine the social horizons of the realist novel. Dialect had in effect colonized the realist novel, forcing fiction to devolve into squalid depictions of working-class life in which “colloquial speech arrives at complete debasement” (699). In what he saw as the narrowing of fiction’s social field, James found novels of dialect “curiously suggestive of how little the cultivation of the truth of vulgar linguistics is a guarantee of the cultivation of any other truth” (698).
The “truth” of dialect for James lay rather in the very fact of its widespread use as a realist narrative strategy. He attributed the quest “for dialectical treasure” to the specific circumstances of an expansive and expanding white race for empire: “[The novel of dialect] is a part, in its way, to all appearance, of the great general wave of curiosity on the subject of the soul abounding not civilized that has lately begun to roll over the Anglo-Saxon globe” (698–99). For James, novels of dialect represented a kind of uncanny reverse colonization of the senses occurring within the heart of the empire that threatened the renewal of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Whether representing the speech of racialized colonial subjects abroad or unruly wage laborers at home, dialect not only represented those who had been largely excluded from the domain of proper fiction but also disseminated the very circumstances of being uncivilized.

The danger, then, for James lay in that these representations of “uncultivated” speech threatened to erode the crucial differences between colonizer and colonized, workers and “their betters,” by displacing the aesthetic practice of studying “the human plant under cultivation” with broken English renditions of “extreme barbarism” (699–700). Only the pitch and tone of civilization stood as the guarantee of civilized difference from the colonized abroad and the “dangerous classes” at home. Couching his terms in the Arnoldian dichotomy of culture and anarchy now globally projected, James argued that national degradation was the inevitable trajectory of U.S. letters in the absence of countervailing narratives of “civilization.” The danger loomed largest for the young United States, just then entering the overseas scramble for empire. In contrast, older imperial European nations had preserved “a tradition of portrayal . . . of those who are the product of circumstances more complex” (699). Despite their imperial entanglements, the field of representation had not been abdicated completely to the “rigorously hard conditions” of the colonized or the urban underclass. Great Britain may have its share of Rudyard Kiplings, but that nation also had the refined Mary Augusta Ward. Among the French, Paul Bourget’s novels counterbalanced the works of a “handful of close observers of special rustic manners” (700).

In contrast to the numerous writers of dialect, James felt that the United States had only William Dean Howells, who, while a fine writer, best addressed “the democratic passion” that admitted little sense of “cultivation” (700). James’s concern, then, was that national distinction would come under erasure by the imperial need to represent how the other half lived. The imperial imperative to colonize involved producing the necessary discursive knowledge of those who once could simply be excluded
from national literary representations. Imperial aesthetics could mobi-
lize dialect as one strategy of constructing colonial difference as a spe-
cific cultural practice, and thus as an object of an ethnographic, imperial
knowledge, but at the same time risked erasing the very differences of civi-
lization it sought to establish by incorporating representations of savage
natives or a surly working class within the refined national consciousness.

Making the utterings and corresponding social conditions of an
increasingly racialized post-Reconstruction urban working class emblem-
at ic of the nation, the U.S. novel of dialect threatened to redefine the let-
ters of the Yankee republic as a challenge to, rather than an example of,
the very idea of a legible, coherent national civilization. James feared the
shelling of Boston by a belligerent Spanish fleet at the time he wrote “The
American Novel of Dialect” in July 1898, but the linguistic challenge posed
by working-class immigrants and other marginalized subjects eventually
became a more fundamental threat to the older Yankee imagined commu-
nity of his youth. Foreign accents might well achieve what foreign fleets
could not.

Stowe, Du Bois, and Nationalist Aesthetics

If the new U.S. imperialism had brought about the turn-of-the-century
rush for “dialectical treasures,” then the world stage of mass culture had
been prepared by the even older dynamics of a previous U.S. imperialism
rooted in slavery. James traced the turn-of-the-century literary fascination
with dialect, and consequently realist representations of gender, race, and
class, to the domestic fictions of Harriet Beecher Stowe. As the “Ameri-
can novel that has made most noise in the world,” Uncle Tom’s Cabin
marked for James the historical moment at which U.S. narrative became
rooted in “rigorously hard conditions and a fashion of English—or call it
of American—more or less abnormal” (“American Novel of Dialect” 700).
As Kenneth Warren has noted, Stowe is the signal presence within James’s
1886 novel The Bostonians of disruptive feminist interventions within
the national public sphere. Basil Ransom’s pointed reference to James’s
fictional rendition of Stowe, the abolitionist author Eliza P. Moseley, “as
the cause of the biggest war of which history preserves the record,” para-
phrases Abraham Lincoln’s more benign reference to Stowe as “the little
lady who made this big war” (qtd. in Warren 94).

Ransom’s rhetorical question—“The Abolitionists brought [the Civil
War] on, and were not the Abolitionists principally females?”—suggests that the nation-tearing trauma found its roots within women’s transgression of the boundaries between the public and domestic spheres (84). Just as female abolitionists of the 1850s justified their public actions by the moral imperative to end slavery, the feminist movement of The Bostonians invoked the slave-like status of white women themselves as the rationale for their public speeches. This entanglement of gender and race as sites of male, imperial oppression became for James the troubling knot that tied aesthetics and politics, the white middle-class domestic sphere with black slave spirituals, Stowe at the middle of the nineteenth century and W. E. B. Du Bois at the beginning of the next.

Judging from his comments about Stowe and Du Bois, James could have scarcely entertained the current inclusion of these authors within the U.S. literary canon. To the extent that both Stowe and Du Bois focused upon gender and racial domination, James suggests that they and their works could not be considered truly “national” in scope. In his 1913 autobiography, A Small Boy and Others, James dismissed Uncle Tom’s Cabin as an evocative, “wonderful ‘leaping’ fish” that had circumvented the literary realm altogether, “much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness.” Stowe’s domestic novel was no novel at all, insofar as readers did not critically “read and appraise” but only “walked and talked and laughed and cried.” This mass cultural phenomenon circumvented “conscious criticism” altogether, thus affirming for James that “appreciation and judgment, the whole impression, were thus an effect for which there had been no [critical] process.” In lieu of a self-reflexive critical response, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and its stage productions instead generated an anti-nationalist political reaction. Relying upon unexamined sentiment rather than critical aesthetic distinctions, Stowe’s novel made but one distinction among its audience—“Northern as differing from Southern”—with nation-tearing implications (A Small Boy 92). Categorically splitting the nation into abolitionist or slaveholder, Stowe’s “flying fish” of a narrative had inappropriately amalgamated fish and fowl, domestic hearth and public stage, literary aesthetics and political polemics. Uncle Tom’s Cabin could only divide the Union with its radical critique of the pre–Civil War national consensus.

The half century separating Stowe’s novel and Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk brought new modes of racial domination, yet James’s assessment of the racial politics of narration and nation did not seem to register the difference. After Harvard University professor William James encour-
aged his brother to read the work of Du Bois, a former student of his at Harvard, the younger James implied that *The Souls of Black Folk*, being “the only ‘Southern’ book of any distinction published for many a year,” was merely provincial and not national (*The American Scene* 697). James defined “Southern” as the sectional “monomania” of slavery’s apologists during the quarter-century preceding the Civil War, as well as its ghostly afterlife (698). James’s conflation of the Northern-reared and Harvard-educated Du Bois (“that most accomplished of members of the negro race”) with the South as a region and slavery as a context casts the early twentieth-century issues of racial domination and civil rights as part of a superannuated sectional past (697).

For James, the post-Reconstruction shift from slavery to segregation was merely a peculiar regional characteristic that did not touch upon the nation’s modern identity. In his acerbic 1907 travel narrative *The American Scene*, the South itself seemed to him “a sort of sick lioness who has so visibly parted with her teeth and claws that we may patronizingly walk all around her” (697). To trade real aesthetic concerns for fatuous political purposes meant crossing the dividing line between the appropriately critical knowledge of aesthetic practice and the improperly divisive knowledge of racial and gender politics. For James, Stowe and Du Bois apparently had crossed that line, subordinating the creation of a properly national culture to the exigencies of a transient political moment. In disavowing the national relevance of Stowe and Du Bois, James considered the civil rights struggles of white women and African Americans as too partial, provincial, and aesthetically inappropriate for U.S. literature. Insofar as he imagined the white supremacist ordering of Jim Crow and lynching to be Southern and emphatically not national, James dismissed the possibility that racialized regimes of violence and exclusion would fundamentally underwrite U.S. national identity itself by the turn of the century.

Yet James’s explicit articulation of discourses of gender, race, and nation, along with the less visible but no less important class dimensions, highlights the necessity of resituating James as a post-Reconstruction intellectual who theorized the layered boundaries of national inclusion and exclusion. The fate of national civilization in the age of mass culture, particularly a national literature’s function and place within modernity, preoccupied James throughout his professional career but emerged most acutely in the texts that foreground the question of national identity. “The American Novel of Dialect” appears roughly midway in the twenty-year
gap between two Jamesian texts that closely interrogate nation building during the post-Reconstruction period: *The Bostonians* and *The American Scene*. From his explicit refusal to write in dialect in *The Bostonians* to his condemnations of the “Accent of the Future” in *The American Scene* and other essays written after his 1904–5 return visit to the United States, James articulated a specifically literary agenda of racial-cultural renewal designed to shore up the nation against the cultural challenges posed by women, African Americans, and immigrants.

If the national patrimony represented by the English language had been put at risk by novels of dialect, then properly literary novels could potentially provide an aesthetic haven from the pressure of vulgar language usage on the streets. As Sara Blair has demonstrated, James’s concern over the state of fiction writing in the mid-1880s stemmed from his desire to foster “the cultivation of the English novel as an instrument of the higher critical and moral intelligence of the race” (83). Yet even as James employed the novel of cultivation in order to renew national culture, *The Bostonians* represents the historical limits of the novel for rescuing a national culture. Subject to, and in fact part of, the very modernity that it was meant to redress, the novel form exhibited the social stresses ventriloquized in dialect by precisely those subordinated, colonized populations who contested the consensus narrative of U.S. history in the Age of Empire. Over the course of the post-Reconstruction era, James’s agonistic engagement with dialect necessarily exposed the profound racial, gender, and class violence at the heart of the imperial nation’s writ.

**The Bostonians: “A Very American Tale”**

Coming off the critical and commercial successes of *Daisy Miller*, *The Europeans*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, James wrote in his journal entry of April 8, 1883, that he was embarking upon “an attempt to show that I can write an American story” (*Complete Notebooks* 19). Anxious to demonstrate that his European migration had not in any way diminished his American experience, James wanted “the whole thing as local, as American, as possible” (19). Despite his best efforts to write “a very American tale, a tale characteristic of our social condition, and life,” James found *The Bostonians* to be his most dismal failure of novelistic representation (47). The “unhappy” novel, first serialized in *Century Magazine* beginning in February 1885 and later published in its entirety in 1886, seemed “born
under an evil star” (31). Initially planning to write six installments, James found he could not finish the narrative in under thirteen, all the while under pressure to deliver The Princess Cassimassima for the Atlantic Monthly. The first installment caused a controversy over what many believed to be James’s satirical portrait of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody in the character of Miss Birdseye. In particular, he found his brother William’s criticism on this point “a very cold douche indeed” (Letters 3:70).

But even this controversy could not conjure a reading public for The Bostonians. James would later recall that Richard Gilder, editor of Century Magazine, wrote to him that “they had never published anything that appeared so little to interest their readers” (Letters 4:778). Financially, the novel proved equally disastrous. The Boston publishing firm of James R. Osgood, which had serialization and publication rights for the United States and Great Britain, went bankrupt in May 1885, leaving the novel’s publication in suspension until James could recover the publication rights and renegotiate a contract with the British firm of Macmillan & Co. The novel sold poorly even then, and failed to garner much critical interest. James wrote dejectedly to his brother, “I hoped much of it, and shall be disappointed—having got no money for it, I hoped for a little glory” (Letters 3:89). Diagnosing the novel’s critical and financial failure as a disturbing slippage of narrative mastery, James would write to William that “[a]ll the middle part is too diffuse and insistent—far too describing and explaining and expatiating. The whole thing is too long and dawdling. This come from the fact (partly) that I had the sense of knowing terribly little about the kind of life I had attempted to describe—and felt a constant pressure to make the picture substantial by thinking it out—penciling and ‘shading’” (Letters 3:91). The subsequent exclusion of The Bostonians (along with Washington Square) from the New York edition further marginalized the novel from James’s already fading popularity. Late in life, James wrote of his desire to revise the narrative and write a critical preface for a new edition but acknowledged that “there can be no question of that . . . at present, or probably ever within the span of my life” (Letters 4:778).

Usually situating The Bostonians within James’s realist middle period, contemporary critics have noted the anomalous position it occupies within both the Jamesian canon and the post–Civil War novelistic genre of the “romance of reunion.” In defiance of generic conventions, James makes the Southerner of the romantic pairing not a woman but the hyper-masculine Basil Ransom, while the Northerner is the working-class, socially
marginal Verena Tarrant rather than the more typical Yankee soldier or businessman. Despite this deviation from “the standard formula for reconciliation,” Nina Silber reads *The Bostonians* as a confirmation of a conservative social ordering of gender relations that James sets against the Gilded Age’s “damnable feminization” as manifested in the growing influence of women in public life (118). Silber’s characterization of James’s opinions may be largely correct, but in a certain way *The Bostonians* is less a confirmation of nationalized gender hierarchies than an uncertain deployment of such gender relations for nationalizing projects. Problematizing the romance of reunion altogether, *The Bostonians* highlights the difficulties posed by the feminist movement’s articulation of racial and gender oppression for post-Reconstruction nation building, an articulation that had been made at least a half-century earlier during the coalescing of the abolitionist movement.

“The Emancipation of Our Sex”

At one point in *The Bostonians*, feminist orator Verena Tarrant banters with erstwhile suitor Basil Ransom, proposing that he join her on a national speaking circuit so they could “go round together as poison and antidote.” Refusing to sanction the appearance of any woman in the public eye, much less publicly debate the feminist characterization of history as the rank oppression of women by men, Ransom declines to enter the spectacular war between the sexes. The conservative ex-slaveholder responds with a suggestion of his own: “I think I should be able to interpret history for you in a new light” (85). In privately contesting what he considers to be the bad revisionist history of the feminist movement circa 1880, Ransom believes he can restore the properly man-made historical course of national, sexual, and racial relations that the feminist movement frequently contested during and after Reconstruction.

Undaunted, Verena later tells the staunchly anti-feminist Ransom that women’s liberation “is only a question of time—the future is ours.” But despite her proleptic optimism, Verena also admits that the present situation for women in the struggle against patriarchy is not so rosy: “Everywhere we heard one cry—‘How long, Lord, how long?’” (210). Appropriating the world-weary cry for freedom uttered by enslaved African Americans, Verena identifies the plight of women with that of slaves before Emancipation. Turning on its head the maxim of nineteenth-century colo-
nial ethnography that the status of women reflected the level of national and cultural progress, the feminist movement, closely identified in *The Bostonians* with Verena and her wealthy friend Olive Chancellor, cast the status of white women as that of slaves not yet freed.\(^7\) Rewriting Victorian domesticity as the latest chapter in the history of human bondage, Verena and Olive threaten to declare what historian Catherine Clinton calls “The Other Civil War,” or the nineteenth-century struggle for women’s rights.\(^8\) Excoriating the likes of the ex-Confederate Ransom, unreformed representative of patriarchal men “who, no doubt, desired to treat women with the lash and manacles, as he and his people had formerly treated the wretched coloured race,” the feminist movement in *The Bostonians* challenged the consensus history of national civilization (150).

The abolitionist project of dividing the Union over the “peculiar institution” appeared to be only the first step towards an even more radical post-Reconstruction feminist goal: emancipating women from the domestic sphere altogether. Reconstruction-era feminists had often deployed abolitionist language to describe their own condition in an attempt to mobilize public support for voting rights. During the heated debates over the proposed Fifteenth Amendment in 1869, abolitionist-feminist Pauline Wright Davis, urging passage of a version that would have extended suffrage to both African Americans and women, asked, “When will women realize that they are slaves, and with one mind and one heart, strike the blow which will set them free?” (qtd. in E. C. Du Bois 74).

For Olive, realizing women’s enslaved status is cast as always remembering women’s oppression at the hands of men, “the brutal, bloodstained, ravening race” (34–35). Ever having “the image of the unhappiness of women” before her, Olive visualizes how “ages of oppression had rolled over them” and “uncounted millions had lived only to be tortured, to be crucified” (34). The result of remembering past oppression, according to James, is that white women ceased to think of themselves as “Americans” and started to consider themselves as enslaved foreigners, a term the narrative identifies with the freedmen. “What else were the Africans?” the narrative asks rhetorically, but “foreigners?” (26). Patriarchy makes men and women foreigners to each other, such that Olive fears that Verena will marry “an enemy of her country” of women (150). Collectively imagining themselves outside the nation, the feminist movement abjures the need to reproduce the nation through adherence to the dominant gendered division of labor. Ignoring the distinctions that marked the public sphere from the domestic one, and consequently the appropriate behavior for cultured women in each, politically vocal women such as Olive and Verena threat-
ened to undermine the basis of a distinguished and distinguishable U.S. culture through their radical activism.

The danger to the nation that the feminists presented, then, lay not simply in the symptomatic abridgement of the “spheres.” Rather, the feminist critique identified the causal connection between those abridgements and the gendered oppression as the very basis of national consensus, a characterization the narrative works to contain even as it rehearses the coercive nature of the seemingly naturalized consensus of marriage. As the novel’s final scene implies, the romance of national reunion stages the primal scene of male coercion. Lynn Wardley argues that the logic of gendered violence in *The Bostonians* structures the terms of national reunion; by relegating the naturally theatrical Verena to the domestic sphere of familial and cultural reproduction, Ransom naturalizes the marital union that guarantees the necessary precondition of the male citizen’s individuality in mass democracy. The spectacular assassination of the feminist movement, along with other political acts of violence, forges the nation: “Assassination, then, like civil war—and, we would add, like the sacrifice of women to private life so that ‘every man’ can ‘keep himself aloof’—is absorbed into democracy’s body” in order to enable the nation’s existence (Wardley 661).

Waxing violent, Ransom feels “capable of kidnapping” Verena from Boston’s Music Hall stage and practically does so “by muscular force” (364; 418). Verena’s protestations are muffled when Ransom “thrust the hood of Verena’s long cloak over her head,” thus removing not only the possibility of her public address but also her public identity as a feminist. But Verena’s transformation into a *femme covert* through marriage does not so much restore what Ransom believes to be the natural order of the patriarchal family and nation but rather points to the dramatic failure of such imaginings. The famously problematic last sentence of *The Bostonians* thus indicates a crisis of narrative closure not entirely within the Master’s control: “It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these [tears] were not the last she was destined to shed” (418). Rather than celebrate the allegorical reunion of North and South through the wedding of Verena and Ransom, the ultimate words of the narrative cast doubt upon the affective security of their, and the nation’s, union. The narrative defers the wedding itself even as it lends portents of future trials for the married couple. For James’s post-Reconstruction national allegory, then, marriage may be necessary, but not necessarily consensual.

Yet this aesthetic failure to enact a consensual romance of reunion is
less a feminist critique of a coercive patriarchal order than a trace of a larger aesthetic problem of realist representation. Even if Ransom ultimately succeeds in stopping up Verena’s mouth with marital kisses, his own pronouncements come under the erasure of James’s realist aesthetics. James disavows Ransom’s Mississippian accent at the onset of the novel, claiming that it was literally unrepresentable on the printed page: “It is not within my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect” (4). While James may cagily cast his rejection of dialect as an intentional failure of authorial mastery, Ransom’s provincial, heterogeneous pronunciation proves to be a problem of realist literary depiction that James can neither fully represent nor completely deny, but can only foreground as a question of national aesthetics. These two queerly un-Jamesian suspensions of narrative mastery in The Bostonians, one cannily self-proclaimed and the other only uncannily implied, emerge symptomatically as James’s anxieties about the racial and cultural purity of the nation and the strained possibilities of its renewal under the perniciously transformative conditions of modernity.

While Olive, Verena, and the other feminists of the novel most clearly figure James’s fears of national disunity, Ransom himself represents the white belligerent masculinity required not only for enforcing the ostensibly consensual romance of reunion, but also the racialist dangers of just such an nation-building endeavor. Even if James demurred to write in dialect, Ransom’s voice still carries within it the long legacy of cultural hybridity, both pre- and post-Emancipation, which haunts James’s description: Ransom’s “discourse was pervaded by something sultry and vast, something almost African in its rich, basking tone, something that suggested the teeming expanse of the cotton-field” (4). The Mississippian accent embodies the violence of slavery that made Ransom “rich” and “basking” at the expense of the black slaves working in the whiteness of the cotton fields. Embedded within Ransom’s voice, then, are the figurations of the pre-Emancipation Southern plantation society and the corresponding linguistic miscegenation that James heard, but could not represent, in Ransom’s voice. James’s decision to forego the use of dialect reflects what Ernest Renan, in his 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne, called the nationalist necessity of being (in Benedict Anderson’s translation) “obliged already to have forgotten” the violent circumstances of the establishment of the new nation’s writ (qtd. in Imagined Communities 200). Remembering projects of national liberation less as the achievement of freedom than as continued racial enslavement, Ransom’s accent reveals something even
more perilous to the post-Reconstruction whiteness: an always-already miscegenated U.S. nationality that speaks with a hybrid tongue. Unable to meet the racially pristine requirements of a national civilization forged in the forgetting of imperial violence, *The Bostonians* can only symptomatically display the traces of this violence in its uncertain, incomplete enactment of marital and national unions.

*The Bostonians* figures what James would come to see as an even greater threat to U.S. nationhood at the turn of the century. While post-Reconstruction feminism challenged the “romance of reunion” by analogizing the oppression of women with oppression of slaves, the expansionary dynamics of U.S. capital, labor, and empire would even more dramatically undermine the basis of national identity. For James, the immigration to the United States of those clearly marginal to the northern European cultural inheritance—Jews, southern Europeans, and others ambiguously positioned within the imperial ordering of “races”—begged the question of the nation’s very existence. With U.S. women taking a cue from their radical Bostonian sisters, the very reproduction of U.S. nationalism seemed in great peril during such drastic changes in demographics. If in the mid-1880s the question of extending the rights of U.S. nationality to two historically subordinated groups—women and the freedmen—came to dominate James’s unease at national inclusion, then twenty years later the question for James would become one of the survival of national civilization itself.

**The American Scene: Dissolving the Nation**

Losing his way through the New Hampshire hills, James described the perplexing experience of asking for directions in *The American Scene*. After an inquiry in English produced only a blank stare, James, noting that his would-be informer “had a dark-eyed ‘Latin’ look,” proceeded to inquire again in French and then Italian. Frustrated with the ensuing silence, he wondered aloud, “What are you then?” The immigrant replied, “I’m an Armenian,” prompting James to comment in surprise, “As if it were the most natural thing in the world for a wage-earning youth in the heart of New England to be” (455). If the transplanted Armenian considered the encounter mundane, then James the returning “native” did not. In calling attention to the young immigrant’s alien status, James claims his nativist rights to a national inheritance. James’s surprise lay largely in the realiza-
tion that not everyone inhabiting the New England landscape necessarily embodied or shared his conception of national belonging.

If James's point in describing the encounter with the Armenian American precludes the narration of its outcome (he does not relate if he received the directions that he needed), and thus only serves to emphasize what he perceived to be the younger man's lack of place within the national fraternity, then the recently arrived immigrant frustrated James's expectation that the English language would interpolate them into a common community where mutual recognition was both natural and national. Rather, James's thwarted attempts at cultural and linguistic categorization highlight the limits of a political imagination based upon a nationalized linguistic tradition. In the face of uncanny faces, James's vision of the United States reveals how the seemingly self-evident intersections of culture and geography made visible the translations of labor and capital across the borders of nationhood. The immigrant, as the unwelcome embodiment of those dynamics, would stand at the margins of national knowledge and cultural citizenship that James would so often ponder in *The American Scene* and other essays about his 1904–5 return visit to the United States.⁹

Shocked and appalled by the vast changes brought about by the massive mobilization of immigrant labor and industrial capital across national borders, James felt the nation's very terms of identity and cohesion to fall under erasure. Feeling “a new chill in his heart,” the “restless analyst” writing *The American Scene* found himself doubting the very idea of a coherent national identity. The lived present of “modernity” in the United States—its ever-evolving technologies, its preternaturally fluid urban spaces, its overseas empire, its innumerable immigrants, its feminized consumerism—seemed on the verge of overwhelming the formative processes and institutions that had historically defined what it meant to be an American. Encounters with “alienism unmistakable, alienism undisguised and unashamed,” led James to conclude that the previous twenty years had seen the most important relation in life, “one's relation to one's country,” undergo a fundamental transformation (459). The international flow of labor and capital had altered the very notion of nation; feeling simultaneously native and alien, James wrote that the very “idea of the country itself underwent something of that profane overhauling through which it appears to suffer the indignity of change” (427).

Nowhere did this appear more vividly apparent for James than at Ellis Island. Visiting “the terrible little” immigrant processing station in the spring of 1905, he watched with fascinated gloom what appeared to him
to be the quickening dissolution of national consciousness. Calling the influx of immigrants “an appeal to amazement beyond that of any sword-swallowing or fire-swallowing of the circus,” James wondered if this mass spectacle “of ingurgitation on the part of our body politic and social” had not in fact resulted in the phagocytic engulfment of U.S. culture by foreign bodies who not only resisted transformation into “Americans” but also alienated the body politic from its previously native constituents. Far from sharing “the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism, with the inconceivable alien,” the U.S. citizenry found itself reduced to “unsettled possession” of a national identity by the immigrant “note of settled possession” (459; emphasis in original).

The immigrant retention of a seemingly foreign cultural identity within the largest U.S. city, New York, only served to emphasize what James saw as the increasing cultural distance not only between his adopted Great Britain and the United States, but also between the Yankee Republic of his youth and the “great commercial democracy” of the turn of the century (432). It seemed that natives had become alienated from the sense of U.S. history as easily as aliens had appropriated the nation. The “modernity” of the United States, James wrote, begged the question of the historical contingency of national identity itself:

Who and what is an alien, when it comes to that, in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history?—peopled, that is, by migrations at once extremely recent, perfectly traceable and urgently required. . . . Which is the American by these scant measures?—Which is not the alien, over a large part of the country at least, and where does one put a finger on the dividing line, or, for that matter, “spot” and identify any particular phase of the conversion, any one of its successive moments? (459)

The antebellum “economic” course of Manifest Destiny, while providing what seemed to be a national history, fundamentally altered the cultural conditions that had brought it into existence. The process by which the jealous eye of Manifest Destiny converted immigrants into Americans also made immigrants of all who were already American. The merely economic circumstances of migration, regardless of the actualities of rooted history or birth, leveled the distinctions between groups who arrived at different historical moments within the narrative of the westward course of empire. In effacing the specific histories of earlier migrations that had established the cultural sense of national feeling, current immigration threatened
to make “natives” disappear, just as European colonial immigration had erased the traces of Indians from the land. James feared that, under the conditions of modernity, the United States would soon become the land of the vanishing American.10

Indeed, in the closing paragraphs of The American Scene, James imagined himself as “a beautiful red man with a tomahawk” dispossessed of the country by the new social order whose rumbling herald was the “missionary Pullman” (735–36). Within James’s move of appropriating American indigeneity lies his profound reflection upon the disinheritance of the land’s first peoples. Only by inhabiting the racial performance of “redface” could James envision the cultural displacement he felt; he found in his identification with the Indian an imagined subject position that resisted incorporation into the narrative of modernity’s progress. However, this figuration is ultimately not so much a symbol of resistance to modernity as merely the superannuated victim of a national developmental narrative.11

Finding “no escape from the ubiquitous alien into the future, or even into the present,” James attempted to retreat into the past to recover the shreds of national consciousness he found missing from the transformed population (428). But in The American Scene the frail sense of the U.S. past, although redolent of personal trial and national reunification, could not stay the destruction of its reminders. Revisiting the Ashburton Place lodgings in Boston where he had, at “the closing-time of the [Civil] War,” started his public writing career, James savored this “conscious memento” of the early scene of authorship for the Nation some forty years earlier as “the scent lingering in a folded pocket-handkerchief.” He revisited Ashburton Place a month later only to find “a gaping void, the brutal effacement, at a stroke, of every related object, of the whole precious past” (543). Upon seeing the absence that was his former home, he commented gloomily, “If I had often seen how fast history could be made I had doubtless never so felt that it could be unmade still faster” (544). James emphasized associative acts of narrative that made for the continuance of personal memory, a sense of place, and national feeling. If bodily senses served to detect the traces of the past left on the landscape, then James’s personal past and national history were linked by the bodily act of writing. Erased by the creative destruction of modernity, the scents of history, the scene of writing, and the sense of nation could only fade away. “We’ve learned the secret of keeping association at bay,” James commented (448).

The deafening hum of modernity overwhelmed the tenuous structures of nationalist history, whether inscribed upon the landscape or within
personal memory. Nothing characterized this loss of personal and national identity more than the destruction of the homes of his youth. When James discovered that the dwelling where he had been born in the New York City of 1843 had met the same fate as the Ashburton Place house, the “high, square, impersonal structure” that replaced “the ruthlessly suppressed birth-house” on Washington Square could not even serve as a commemoration of James’s structure of feeling (431–32). Casting an unwelcome shadow upon the urban landscape, skyscrapers reorganized New York’s skyline with a vehemence that appalled James. If the disappearance of his former dwellings disrupted James’s connection to the national past, then their replacements prohibited even the idea of history. Rather than read the “tall building” as a sign of social progress through technological advancement, James interpreted skyscrapers as the brutal encroachment of crass commercialism upon the historic U.S. city. Skyscrapers did not, and could not, last long enough to provide the cognitive anchoring of a national landscape.

Even more perniciously, the mere presence of skyscrapers effectively erased the still-existing repositories of U.S. culture. Nowhere was this more apparent for James than in Boston, where the Athenaeum lay prostrate under “the detestable ‘tall building’ again.” James found that the enormous structures surrounding the epitome of an earlier, properly national knowledge defeated any efforts to enter New England’s “temple of culture.” James lamented, “To approach the Athenaeum [is] only to find all disposition to enter it drop dead as if from quick poison” (546). The curious animation of the philistine edifices illustrated what James saw as an openly hostile anti-historicism of a malignant, commercial agency:

The brute masses, above the comparatively small refined façade . . . [have] for the inner ear the voice of a pair of school-bullies who hustle and pummel some studious little boy. “Exquisite’ was what they called you, eh? We’ll teach you, then, little sneak, to be exquisite! We allow none of that rot round here.” (546)

If the bullying skyscrapers with working-class dialects “hustle and pummel” the temple of culture, then their own façades did not provide an alternative nationalist pedagogy for James. Blanketed by windows, the skyscraper’s façade spoke “loudest for the economic idea” (435). Windows eliminated the quiet interstices, the dividing lines of public and private that created a cultured environment. The result was an incessant, grating
architectural shout that epitomized what the New York conversation, whether of the skyline or the streets, had become.

Precluding a historical narrative of the built environment, the commercialism embodied in skyscrapers had become for James “the local unwritten law that forbids almost any planted object to gather in a history where it stands, forbids in fact any accumulation that may not be recorded in the mere bank-book.” Unanchored from all other aspects of the social, history had been reduced to the economic script: “This last became long ago the historic page” (474; emphasis in original). Mirroring the constant flux of immigrants upon the streets below in their enforced transience upon the urban scene, the “brute masses” of tall buildings monstrously, corporately doubled the immigrant masses’ disruption of the national community, making U.S. culture itself appear at the mercy of the creative destruction of modernity. Linked in their disruption of the national construction of history, the skyscraper and the immigrant, the dual faces of modernity, disrupted the national narration of history with their vulgar voices.

Even the sense of U.S. history itself became subject to this logic of history-destroying commodification. Visiting Washington Irving's house in the Hudson River valley, James deplored that tourists only saw dollar signs where they should instead see the national past. The “‘dear’ old portraits of the first half of the century” became not indices of the continuity of a nation through history but only commodities within the ever intrusive market, “very dear to-day when properly signed and properly sallow.” Writing of Irving's conditions of authorship, James nostalgically cherished the privacy and compactness of U.S. letters during Irving's day, which for him betrayed no sense of the penetration of the market. This “caressing diminutive” vision of authorial autonomy allows James to consider Irving as a nationalist writer whose productions helped inaugurate a cultural sense of what being an “American” meant. In contrast, Irving's house had been transformed into just another tourist site in the eyes of the post-nationalist sensibility, which made it impossible to locate authorial production outside the market, or the products of culture to be anything other than commodified nostalgia. Rather, Irving's house and other landmarks of U.S. history had become just another link in the realm of commodities now packaged across the landscape as tourist-trap “places.” James lamented, “Modernity, with it pockets full of money and its conscience full of virtue, its heart really full of tenderness, has seated itself there under pretext of guarding the shrine” of national culture (484).

This loss of national history meant nothing less than the loss of national
identity for James. The sense of national identity depended upon some perception of a recognizable continuity with the past, or, in other words, a privileged placement within that nation’s history. Susan Griffin characterizes the Jamesian narration of the self as one that, in the formulations of functionalist psychology of the turn of the century, composed subjects through the recognition that “without some connection between past and present, identity is lost” (92). Griffin notes James’s dilemma over identity in *The American Scene* as a problem of representation generally, and specifically, the problem of representing a nation with so seemingly tenuous a history. According to Griffin, James found the iconographic depiction of history, the strategy of the Hudson River School painters, curiously ahistorical. The illustrations of wildlife and Native Americans in the U.S. landscape increasingly gave the sense of a timeless past while the machines of change entered the garden. For Griffin, the only avenue of historical narrative left to James was the fall into the cycle of imperial fruition and decay, figured as the intrusive consumer-tourist culture inaugurated by the railroad. James’s preoccupation with the fate of U.S. national identity, and particularly letters, highlighted concerns over the very possibility of history, whether imagined as the cyclical rise and fall of empire or as the linearly progressive expansion of U.S. democracy. The very possibility of narration itself seemed jeopardized.

The problem of representing the historical continuity of the United States under circumstances that destroyed the very possibilities of such narration plagued James throughout *The American Scene*. In the preface to the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, written about the same time as the travelogue, James described how the sense of Italian history, so strongly embodied in the Venetian scenes outside his window, related stories that crowded out his own. “The Venetian footfall and the Venetian cry” frustrated his attempts to fashion narratives other than a properly Italian one. James likened his search for “a lame phrase” for *The Portrait of a Lady* within the Venetian landscape to calling out an “army of glorious veterans” to arrest a vagrant peddler. Its memories organized as the military branch of the nation, Venice spoke in the nationalist accents of historical narrative (1071). *The American Scene* offered no such inspiration; the “Accent of the Future” spoke alarmingly of the blank page the future of U.S. letters promised to become. James concluded, “Certainly, we shall not know it for English—in any sense for which there is an existing literary measure” (470–71). The “Accent of the Future,” whether in the novel or on the streets, itself indicated a quickening dissolution of
national identity made possible by the experience of what James termed “that profane overhauling” he elsewhere identifies as modernity (427).

If the historic landscape itself became commodified and thus evacuated of national history in *The American Scene*, then James fitfully acknowledged his own complicity with modernity as he sat behind the plate-glass window of the Pullman car as a “restless analyst” whose analysis is enabled by the very conditions of tourist sightseeing he deplored. As Wendy Graham comments, “[m]odernity produces this doubling of consciousness in the subject, who mourns the passing of an older sensibility of intimate personal relation . . . while rapidly habituating himself to the detachment produced by modern conditions” (246). Self-conscious of his modernist dilemma, James distinguished between the fact of modernity and what he believed to be its self-congratulatory hypocrisy about the world it had created. “I accept your ravage,” he admitted in an apostrophe to modernity, but what he could not accept was the “pretended message of civilization” that generated “a colossal recipe for the creation of arrears,” or the multitude of questions about lack of dense national relations that modernity in the United States left in its wake like “some monstrous unnatural mother might leave a family of unfathered infants on doorsteps or in waiting-rooms” (734–35). At the top of this long list of the arrears was the question of “‘American’ character” as “the result of such a prodigious amalgam, such a hotch-potch of racial ingredients” (456). If modernity unnaturally propagated the seeming inevitability that white natives faced racial and cultural extinction, then U.S. women would share the blame in not reproducing a properly legitimate nationalist genealogy. The immigrant and the skyscraper, the embodiments of transnational labor and capital, threatened the very possibility of national history itself, while women seemed determined to aid modernity’s dissolution of the United States.

**Women, Language, and Difference**

Immigrant labor and skyscraper-building capital might be destroying a sense of national identity with their respective assaults upon the English language and the very possibility of U.S. history, but this was because Americans, especially women, had traitorously allowed it. In commentaries contemporaneous with *The American Scene—The Question of Our Speech*, “The Speech of American Women,” and “The Manners of American
Women”—James outlined the importance of speech, and particularly women’s speech, for the reproduction of properly national social relations. In particular, James assailed what he considered their wholesale betrayal of the one bodily practice essential to the preservation of a civilized national culture: “the tone question” of the spoken English language. In The Question of Our Speech, James railed against having “handed over our property” to “the American Dutchman and Dago” so freely: “Our national use of vocal sound, in men and women alike, is slovenly—an absolute inexpert daub of unapplied tone” (41; 25). The increasingly heterogeneous character of the United States had resulted in yielding the pronunciation of the English language to those that James, in The Bostonians, had termed “the children of disappointment from beyond the seas” (316).

Seeking to redeem English from those who would speak most improp-erly, James placed “the labial question,” or enunciation, at the heart of issues of U.S. nationality and civilization (“Speech” 179). The proper vocalization of language served as the primary measure of a national cultural consciousness. “A care for tone” indexed the very achievement, or lack thereof, of a national civilization (Question 13). As the sensitive index of “civilization,” pronunciation of English and its representation within the realist novel revealed the slow accretion of habits, for James so evident in Europe and so tenuous in the United States, which demarcated a distinct national culture. Pronunciation marked the most fundamental tier of a series of bodily practices that made the civilized difference. Without proper speech, the very possibility of a national civilization became unthinkable. For James, the very ability to create “civilization” lay within the subtle degrees of sonic differences possible in proper speech, down to “the integrity of our syllables”: “The syllables of our words, the tones of our voice, the shades of our articulation” served as “the most precious of our familiar tools” (“Speech” 196; 198). Proper speech, the most important of manners, taught how “to discriminate . . . to begin to prefer form to the absence of form, to distinguish color from the absence of color” (Question 36). Hinging upon making distinctions of form and color, speech structured the aesthetics of perception as well as the perception of aesthetics.

The discrete discriminations offered by the habit of proper enunciation formed the cornerstone for the other bodily habits of civilization. Providing the key cognitive ability that distinguished the civilized from the not civilized, proper pronunciation of English reproduced nationalized epistemologies of whiteness to reinscribe tenuous racial-colonial differences. The racial renewal of Anglo-Saxon civilization required the
painstaking articulation of the “labial” to properly civilized bodily conduct: “The interest of tone is the interest of manners, and the interest of manners is the interest of morals, and the interest of morals is the interest of civilization” (“Speech” 199). Civilization for James was discrimination structured by language, but specifically discriminations whose time-worn paths became organized in historically specific ways as the second nature of manners precisely because they were rehearsed continuously in everyday life. These ensembles of proper speech habits and other manners were, for James, nation-building blocks. Recording “not only the history of the voice, but positively the history of the national character, almost the history of the people,” speech and manners constituted the physical and psychic impressions of national culture that made all the relations of civilized life “hang together” (Question 34).

But if properly pronounced language enacted the epistemological possibilities of nation in its very utterance throughout a community of speakers, then mispronounced or accented English served as a reminder of the precarious state of that civilized national identity. As early as the 1882 short story “The Point of View,” James had figured the impending “destruction of society” as the “vocal inflections of little news-boys” echoing in the voices of educated, “charming children” (536–37). A quarter-century later in The American Scene, James registered the “the piteous gasp” of a distressed English language in the “unprecedented accents” he heard spoken by immigrants inside an otherwise amenable New York East Side café (471). Within these “torture-rooms of the living idiom,” James looked in vain “for some betrayal of a prehensile hook for the linguistic tradition as one had known it” (470–71). That the immigrant speakers within the café represented not “the mere mob” but “comparative civility” merely increased his “‘lettered’ anguish” at the seemingly inevitable disappearance of habits of discrimination that made for a distinctively “American” civilization (470).

Consonants disappeared and reappeared inappropriately, vowels drawled out of existence, and random yet stubbornly persistent noises attached themselves to the speech of even the educated, who, in apparent disregard for the differences between popular, political, and aesthetic discourses, talked “of vanilla-r-ice-cream, of California-r-oranges, of Cuba-r and Porto Rico, of Atlanta-r- in Calydon, and (very resentfully) of ‘the very idea-r-of’ any intimation that their performance and example in these respects may not be immaculate” (Question 27). Even teachers employed these maulings of speech, much to James’s dismay. Instead of “American-
izing” immigrants through proper pronunciation, the democratic institutions of public education reflected the dominance of the million and the newspapers in this matter. It appeared to James that nothing was more apparent than the lack “of any positive tradition of speech, any felt consensus on the vocal, the lingual, the labial question, on the producing of the sound, on the forming of the word, of the discriminating of the syllable, on the preserving of the difference” that would prevent an alien takeover (“Speech” 179). Rather, U.S. national identity resided in the negation of discriminatory difference itself: even “as Nature abhors a vacuum, so it is of the genius of the American land and the American people to abhor, whenever may be, a discrimination” (American Scene 604).

Women in particular played central roles in guarding the nation’s cognitive abilities to register “noticed differences” (Question 15). In his 1905 commencement address to the graduating class of women at Bryn Mawr College, published later that year as The Question of Our Speech, James exhorted the graduates to exercise their social influence as “models and missionaries, perhaps a little even martyrs, of the good cause” (52). Elite women such as these graduates did seem to make the best transmitters, as teachers and mothers, of vocal training, and, therefore, of national culture. Consequently, for James the great responsibility of transmitting “the very core of our social heritage,” or “simply the idea of secure good manners,” became a matter of “good breeding” (14). In the essay “The Speech of American Women,” published a year after the Bryn Mawr address, James wrote that the speech of “well-bred” women “makes the demonstration—shows us what tone may do for intercourse and the beauty of life; what grace it may, even in the absence of other enrichment, contribute to the common colloquial act.” It fell to women of the national elite to inculcate these nation-building practices in their children: “It is in their cords to give more effect to the intention” (180).

But if James appealed to the women of Bryn Mawr to help rescue the language, then it seemed to him for the most part that even, or especially, educated women insisted upon mauling the distinctions between sounds, “articulating as from sore mouths, all mumbling and whining and vocally limping and shuffling” (“Speech” 193). U.S. women spoke as they pleased rather than as they should, according to James, and did so because they had positively tied the freedom to do as they liked to the freedom to speak as they liked, “since the emancipation of the American woman would thereby be attested” (“Speech” 195). He attributed women’s expanding ability to speak as they chose to the fundamentally gendered shift in
social power after Reconstruction. Immediately after the Civil War, James found men in charge of national culture. Reviewing the British anthology *Modern Women* for the *Nation* in 1868, James asserted that women, far from setting the general moral tone of society or even offering a domestic alternative, merely reflected the world men made. When modern women “present an ugly picture,” he wrote, men should “cast a glance at their own internal economy,” since men “give the ton—they pitch the key” of all social relations (*Literary Criticism* 25).

But James’s tone would change by the time he wrote the 1884 short story “A New England Winter.” Upon his return to the United States, the Francophile expatriate Florimond Daintry would comment that Boston was “a city of women, in a country of women” (113). During the transatlantic absence of this Jamesian protagonist, the patriarchal ordering of U.S. society had apparently been superseded by a distinctly feminized regime. Shortly thereafter, Basil Ransom of *The Bostonians* would link women’s speech to the downfall of the masculinist ability to discriminate for the sake of the nation’s good, “to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is.” Fearing the loss of this discriminatory technology to discern the elements of “a very queer and partly very base mixture,” he launches a tirade against “the most damnable feminisation” of a “canting age”: “The whole generation is womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it’s a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don’t soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and most pretentious that has ever been” (311). Echoing Ransom some twenty years later, James complained about the imperial stature of women in every social relation not that “of the stock-exchange or football field” (“Speech” 178). Men had become creatures of commerce after the Civil War, abdicating the field of “society,” or the innumerable relationships that made “civilization” not solely a function of economics, in order to take care of business. Women occupied the vast social field thus abandoned and became “occupied in developing and extending her wonderful conquest” (*American Scene* 484). As a consequence, what James considered the social preeminence of women in the United States became the defining characteristic of national relations, “the sentence written largest in the American sky” (*American Scene* 639).14

Nothing for James would characterize the predominant situation of women more succinctly than the female voice in public arenas. While
James came to articulate these complaints most vocally in his commentaries written during and after his 1904–5 visit to the United States, he traced the genesis of his concern to the previous return visits of 1882–83, when he returned to bury his parents and subsequently finalized his plans to write *The Bostonians*. In “The Speech of American Women,” James recalled how in the Boston of a quarter-century before, a city of “supremely conservative instincts,” he was shocked by the “vociferous pupils” of a “seminary for young ladies” who hooted, howled, and “ingenuously shrieked and bawled to each other across the street and from its top to its bottom” (183–84). The problem for James was that this tone “was to be of use—that was the point—not in the gregarious life of labor, not in the rough world of the tenement, the factory, or the slum, the world unconscious of semitones, of vocal adjustments, but in the drawing-rooms and ball-rooms of the best society the country could show” (184–85).

If in *The Bostonians* Ransom could characterize a small group of feminists of the 1870s as a “herd of vociferating women” (46), then James would object in the 1907 article “The Manners of American Women” to the auditory uproar generated by a “bevy of young women . . . taking vociferous possession” of the Pullman car he occupied during his cross-country excursion. “From the point of view of tone and manner,” these women flaunted the distinctions between “the great dusty public place” and their private “playground and maiden-bower” by “calling, giggling . . . shouting, flouncing, romping, [and] uproariously jesting” in the former (“Manners” 207–8). For James, the sight of these women reading newspapers and eating “the most violently heterogeneous food” marked the extent to which manners had already disappeared as a national civilized practice. Refusing to exercise “an elementary power or disposition to discriminate,” a woman James observed eating let “the dauntless ladle plunge into the sherbet without prejudice to its familiarity with the squash, and straggle toward the custard while still enriched with the stuffing of the turkey” (“Manners” 227). This vision of “mixing salads with ices, fish with flesh, hot cakes with mutton chops, pickles with pastry, and maple syrup with everything” led James to comment:

What law and what logic prevailed . . . at such a conceptions of a meal, and what presumption for felt congruities, for desired or perceived delicacies, in the other reaches of life, would it rouse in the mind of a visitor introduced for the first time to the spectacle? It was inevitable to feel, after a little, that speech and town and the terms of intercourse were, on the part
of these daughters of freedom, notions exactly as loose and crude as such notions of the nature of a repast. ("Manners" 227)

In other words, failing to make discreet choices about the foods they ate, U.S. women were unlikely to discriminate in other, more important matters of racial and cultural reproduction. All too apt to encourage biological, cultural, and linguistic miscegenation, U.S. women were for James “queens” without hierarchy. Supreme yet undiscriminating, their habits led to the “most violently heterogeneous” mixing of tastes, whether of food, newspapers, or companions.¹⁵

Having been fostered in an environment free of criticism, “‘queens’ on such easy terms” exercised their social power in an utterly unself-conscious and arbitrary way ("Manners" 238). Far from being too aristocratically “European” for U.S. democracy, the position of American women allowed them not just to ignore the relational nature of social life but to be unaware of it altogether. According to James, women were all too much the “most freely encouraged plant in our democratic garden” ("Speech" 167). Elite women from the United States apparently did not realize that “social, civil, conversational discipline consisted in having to recognize knowledge and competence and authority, accomplishment, experience and ‘importance,’ greater than one’s own” ("Speech” 238). This willful ignorance precipitated a crisis in what James saw as the most conservative, and hence most important, social institution for the transmission of national culture: marriage. Holding that it was “easier to overlook any question of speech than to trouble about it” as it was “to snort or neigh, to growl or to ‘meow,’ than to articulate and intonate,” James wrote, “The conservative interest is really as indispensable for the institution of speech as for the institution of matrimony. Abate a jot of the quantity, and, much more, of the quality, of the consecration required, and we practically find ourselves emulating the beasts, who prosper as well without a vocabulary as without a marriage-service” (Question 47). But “the related state” was precisely what was missing for James in modern women. His fellow female travelers upon his cross-country journey “thus met and noted were of divorced and divorcing condition and intention—to which presumption their so frequently quite unhusbanded appearance much contributed” ("Manners” 243; emphasis in original). Rather than reflecting the Victorian domestic ideal of a moral, nurturing female domesticity, U.S. women represented a potential threat to the “secure transmission of manners” of a properly national civilization.
By disrupting the properly patriarchal paths of linguistic and cultural transmission, the uncouth manners and mouths of U.S. women threatened the racial renewal of Anglo-American civilization in its imperial dominance over the rest of the world. As U.S. women vocally refused what he considered their proper role in linguistically renewing the discriminatory epistemology of whiteness, James would attempt to shift the racial-cultural renewal of “national civilization” onto the novel itself. If a racialized pronunciation and perception could menace U.S. culture through the always unsecured bodies of white women, then for James the novel form possibly guaranteed its continuance by serving as the repository of the transmission process, both linguistically and historically. Even the combative “New Woman” of James’s imagined dialogue in “The Speech of American Women” concedes that speech in novels (at least James’s) is “syllabled” and “spelled out,” to which he adds:

> Depend on it, dear young lady, these parts are there, theoretically, all sounded. The integrity of romance requires them without exception. And what are novels but the lesson of life? The retention of the covenanted parts is their absolute basis, without which they wouldn’t for a moment hang together. The coherency of speech is the narrow end of the wedge they insert into our consciousness: the rest of their appeal comes only after that. (197)

Building national discriminations, the truly literary novel functioned to preserve national culture through the performance of linguistic distinctions. If national culture was constituted through the “wedge” of the novel, then novelistic language must not become contaminated by the guttural utterings of immigrant, working-class African Americans, or unruly white women. Even representing dialect in dialog, much less narrative, would become a national security threat. With the fate of Anglo-American civilization resting upon the Master’s choice of words, James effectively transfers what had been white women’s domestic role of cultural conservator to the properly aesthetic writer. Creating the racialized distinction between the national canon of serious literature and the ephemera of mass culture, James’s realist aesthetic opened the high modernist abyss into which the racial uncertainties of empire can be thrown.