

**"The Social Dusk of that Mysterious Democracy":
Race, Sexology, and the New Woman in Henry James's**

The Bostonians

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When Henry James started compiling notes for *The Bostonians* in 1883, he summarized his intentions for the new project: "I wished to write a very *American* tale, a tale very characteristic of our social condition, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was: the situation of woman, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf" (*Notebooks* 47, emphasis in original). In the author's attempt to capture the larger postbellum age through the emergence of women's suffrage, one cannot help but wonder if something else is left out. Given the immense upheaval the United States had experienced since 1860, writing an "American" tale in the early 1880s would be a project of almost epic proportion. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments had finally given African-American men legal citizenship and all accompanying privileges; yet, American women—black and white alike—would not receive full citizenship until 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. It is evident from the novel's subject matter—with its themes of women's suffrage, the "Boston marriage," and postbellum sectional discord—that James was somewhat attuned to the social and political controversies stirring in his native land. Still, it would have been unthinkable for the author, whose famous directive in "The Art of Fiction" is to be a writer "on whom nothing is lost," to overlook the racial issues that were so much a part of Gilded Age America (*Tales* 352).

By the 1880s, larger questions of race, gender, and sexuality had already hit the world stage, no more so than in the medical and scientific communities of Europe and the United States. At the time James published his novel in book form in 1886, a new discourse was developing that linked the codification of homosexuality (usually called "sexual inversion" at the time) to the codification of race. As sexologists Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds wrote in the 1890s, "And now that the problem of

religion has practically been settled, and that the problem of labour has at least been placed on a practical foundation, the question of sex—with the racial questions that rest on it—stands before the coming generations as the chief problem for solution” (x). Thanks in large part to Siobhan B. Sommerville’s recent study *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, we are beginning to understand the larger implications of Ellis and Symonds’s remarks. In giving coherence to these vague suggestions, she argues that “the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies” (4).¹

Wendy Graham has shown that James was deeply influenced by current-day sexological studies. In *Henry James’s Thwarted Love* (1999), she explains that “James’s self-portraits (fictional, epistolary, and autobiographical) are consistent with sexologists’ constructions of homosexuality during his lifetime” (22). To what extent James was conscious of the imbrication of the racial and sexual discourse of which Sommerville speaks is not at all clear. Still, he was certainly aware of one thing: in the late nineteenth century, America and Europe had developed a widespread fear of women—alarm over their consumption habits in the marketplace and dread over their psychic mystery. This fear has been thoroughly discussed by a number of social historians and critics, but only recently has scholarship attempted to expose how the emerging “New Woman”—that androgynous specter gaining greater public visibility by the 1880s—was implicated in the criss-crossing discourses of race and homosexuality.²

Like Sommerville, Lisa Duggan engages these themes in *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (2000), wherein she recounts the events surrounding the 1892 murder of Freda Ward by her lover Alice Mitchell in Memphis, Tennessee. Alongside this story, Duggan posits the various lynching narratives made known by Ida B. Wells, who, in the same year and in the same city, edited the anti-lynching pamphlets *Southern Horrors*. In both cases, Duggan pays particular attention to the role of the “unstable” woman. In the lesbian murder case, this persona is exemplified in Freda Ward, the outwardly “feminine” love object of Alice Mitchell’s ostensibly mannish desire. What made Ward unstable in the public’s opinion was that she could choose to involve herself in a lesbian relationship or she could choose to reject Alice’s love altogether and marry a male suitor, thus living up to Victorian American ideals. Duggan also points out how the unstable white woman appears in Wells’s depiction of various southern lynching narratives. Challenging the conventional notion that white women were the passive, hapless victims of black men’s sexual desire, Wells refigures this narrative to expose the white woman as

actually having a choice to engage in sex with a black man. Given these events in Memphis, the country was vexed and alarmed: the “modern” woman, poised at the brink of the twentieth century, could exercise her own agency, choosing either heterosexuality or homosexuality, and she could even choose her own love object, black or white.

James himself was intrigued by various types of unstable women, writing stories that depicted their frequent opaqueness or capriciousness. In *Daisy Miller* (1878), for example, Winterbourne can never decide if Daisy is “exceedingly innocent” or an “unscrupulous” flirt (*Tales* 10). Similar mysteries characterize the alluring Madame de Vionnet, Chad Newsome’s possible lover in *The Ambassadors* (1903). But Verena Tarrant, the young, eloquent suffragist of *The Bostonians*, may elude the reader more than any of James’s other women. The narrative notes quite early that Verena has a “singular hollowness of character” (85). Because we do not have access to her thoughts, we are unsure of her sexual inclinations—or even her own racial makeup.

Already there exists an extensive critical debate over whether the novel’s female protagonist, Olive Chancellor, is a lesbian and to what extent Verena reciprocates that affection.³ This critical conversation can be updated by adding to it a much-needed discussion of race as it became imbricated in the concurrent discourses of the New Woman and homosexuality. Consistently throughout the novel, James endows his two protagonists, Olive and Basil, with the ability to perceive homosexual desire in racialized terms. Not surprisingly, their perceptions come to bear on the “empty” vessel Verena (Wilt 293). In wishing to make Verena her lover, Olive sees this young radical as a racialized, exotic Other whom she can guide and control. Insofar as Basil Ransom perceives Verena to be involved in a lesbian relationship, he, too, sees her in racialized terms. His perception is perhaps more complex than Olive’s because he is both attracted to and repelled by Verena’s perceived blackness and lesbianism. In short, she presents a challenge for the young southerner: having “surrendered the remnants of his patrimony” by failing to eke out a living on his Mississippi plantation, Ransom is looking for a way to reclaim his manhood (43). In his struggle to woo her—and thus domesticate her through marriage—he is not only “saving” the young suffragist from lurid lesbianism and blackness, but also re-establishing his own place in the conventional sexual hierarchy. That Ransom ultimately wins out over his cousin Olive suggests that James may be making a larger statement about the function of both the independent-minded New Woman and the politically enfranchised African American in the postbellum imagination. Just as James sees the nation not yet willing to take on larger issues of sexual liberation at the end of the nineteenth century, he cannot conceive of a racially diverse

America, an America that makes room for blacks within its citizenry or national iconography. Through its overlapping (homo)sexualized and racialized imagery, *The Bostonians* reflects a nation's deeper broodings about the social makeup of American modernity.

The New Woman Olive Chancellor is, in James's artistic vision, the postbellum legatee of the transcendentalist movement. Her progressive stance on women's emancipation, her Boston lineage, her abolitionist sympathies, and even her argumentative personality in many ways make her the fictional reincarnation of Margaret Fuller. In other respects, James moved well beyond Fuller for his portrait of Olive, suggesting that her desire for women's emancipation may be read as indication of her manly lesbianism. The narrator tells us: "It was a curious incident of her zeal for the regeneration of her sex that manly things were, perhaps on the whole, what she understood best" (137). The "manly things" the narrator mentions carry over into her androgynous appearance. Her lack of ornamentation and "plain dark dress" emphasize that "[s]he had absolutely no figure, and presented a certain appearance of feeling cold" (40, 48).

Within the larger context of the overlapping discourses of homosexuality and race, Olive represents what sexologist Karl Ulrichs termed an *Urninde*—a woman "with a masculine love drive" (qtd. in Katz 51). According to Ulrichs's writings from the 1860s, *Urnings and Urnindes* were respective terms for homosexual men and women found in white, bourgeois populations. Though their same-sex desire was an anomaly, these individuals themselves were neither pathological nor dangers to society (Kennedy 30). Because of her middle-class background and frequent access to education, the *Urninde* was periodically conflated with the figure of the New Woman. Moreover, the more civilized classes of such individuals might also possess "fine romantic feeling" similar to Olive's romanticizing of Verena (qtd. in Duggan 160). From its outset the novel makes clear that Olive has a deep-seated hatred of anything conventional: "She always felt more at her ease in the presence of anything strange. It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage; which was natural enough, inasmuch as, to her vision, almost everything that was usual was iniquitous" (42). As the novel will show soon enough, this disdain for the humdrum of Victorian American domestic life can be seen in both sexual and racial terms. It is "natural enough" to Olive that heteronormativity and the bourgeois manifestations of whiteness it supports are as *unnatural* to her as women's suffrage is to her cousin Basil.

When Olive arrives at Miss Birdseye's house with Ransom in tow, she meets Verena and finds in her a potential love object. Enthralled by the speech Verena gives later that evening, Olive invites the young suffragist to meet her the following day. Through subtle probing during this second

meeting, Olive wonders if Verena might be a more outwardly feminine variant of her own sexually inverted type. She then admits, ““You seem to me very wonderful. I don’t know what to make of you’” (100). We do understand only a page later, however, that Olive’s imaginative faculties have gotten the best of her. Regarding Verena, she thinks:

It was just as she was that she liked her; she was so strange, so different from the girls one usually met, seemed to belong to some queer gipsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a rope-dancer or a fortune teller; and this had immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to the “people,” threw her into the social dusk of that mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes know so little about, and with which (in a future possibly very near) they will have to count. (101)

Given these racially coded images, Olive is less likely to see Verena’s complexion as uber-white (Dr. Prance had noted the night before that Verena looked “certainly very pale” and must be “anaemic” [82]), but instead as a blank page upon which Olive can paint her own portrait of racial and sexual desire. Though this premise may appear contradictory, it is really no more than an interpretive reaffirmation of James’s role as a proponent of psychological realism, for psychological realists contend that the psyche, often caught up in a solipsism of desire, superimposes its own sense of reality on the outside material world.

Though Olive admits she does not know what to “make” of Verena, she wastes no time in conjuring up some romantic scheme that sates her taste for the exotic. In Olive’s mind Verena runs the gamut from Bohemian to a circus rope-dancer. Considering the narrow definitions of whiteness extant in the nineteenth century, these exotic figures are very much racialized. The most tantalizing aspect to Verena’s gypsy-like appearance is that her racial origin is ambiguous. With the transient lifestyle attributed to Bohemians, the narrative implies, Verena might very well be the daughter of an exotic moor or a Middle Eastern sultan—or even, given her father’s Hebrew first name, Selah, a wandering Jew. This hint of Jewishness that James slips into his text may be more indicative of blackness than at first glance, for as Katya Gibel Azoulay remarks, the dissemination of Jews across much of the world spawned people whose skin color ranged from the “pale northern European Jew” to the “dark African or Asian” (11). Azoulay’s premise merely echoes a larger historical conflation of Jewishness and blackness that first gained public visibility at about the time James was writing in the 1870s and 1880s.⁴

While this Jewish strain is not as prevalent throughout the rest of the novel, it does open the door to a larger consideration of blackness as it

would have been coded or articulated in postbellum America. With the passage's emphasis on both darkness (the "social dusk") and impending political enfranchisement, Verena may very well appear in Olive's mind as an adumbration of the American polis once the manacles of racial oppression and prejudice have been lifted from African Americans. Her clothing is not only "bright"—suggesting the garish hand-me-downs of black slaves—but also "vulgar," implying that Verena is "of the people." She is the new "flower of the great Democracy" (128) for whom both abolition and universal suffrage have been fought in their respective eras. The novel recognizes early on, after all, that the suffragists of the postbellum era were the abolitionists of the 1830s through 1850s.

It is worth noting here the importance of the novel's title, for Boston was undeniably the center of nineteenth-century abolitionism *and* suffrage in America. Well-known abolitionists such as Lydia Maria Child, who was white, and African American Maria W. Stewart were residents of Boston. There and elsewhere, women such as Child, Stewart, and the Grimké sisters from South Carolina began to link black slavery to the domestic confinement of white middle-class women (Walters 105). In James's novel, Miss Birdseye most clearly embodies this double legacy of reform. "She was in love, even in those days, only with causes, and she languished only for emancipations. But they had been the happiest days, for when causes were embodied in foreigners (what else were Africans?), they were certainly more appealing" (56). Though too young to have participated in abolition, Olive seems especially sensitive to the American lower classes—of which newly-freed slaves were most certainly a part. We cannot help but wonder if Olive, like Miss Birdseye, "did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage" so as to be able to free them all over again (56).

It is no surprise, then, that Olive conflates racial and sexual liberation. She "liked to think that Verena, in her childhood, had known almost the extremity of poverty, and there was a kind of ferocity in the joy with which she reflected that there had been moments when this delicate creature came near (if the pinch had only lasted a little longer) to literally going without food. These things added to her value for Olive" (128). As James intimates, the sober-minded suffragist may be casting herself as William Lloyd Garrison opposite Verena's Frederick Douglass. In such a case, the escaped slave narrative of mid-nineteenth-century America works its way subtly into the text. The popularity of antebellum slave narratives was attributed in large part to northern women who, like Olive, had the education and the leisure time to invest in reading. Given an *Urninde's* purported sensitivity to art and sentiment, it seems that "the romance of the people" (62) Olive conjures in her mind guides her feelings for Verena.

Yet Verena's "value" for Olive goes well beyond romantic sentiment.

Despite the embarrassment of being from the Boston gentry (the narrative reveals that “the Chancellors belonged to the *bourgeoisie*—the oldest and best” [61]), she cannot help but think in pecuniary metaphors. The more Verena resembles an escaped slave, the more Olive’s fantasies circulate in the realm of commerce: “[T]he prospect of suffering was always, spiritually speaking, so much cash in [Olive’s] pocket” (129). The narrative pronounces this race-cash association most prominently when Olive takes the necessary steps to literally buy Verena’s freedom from her mesmerist father. Olive suspects that Selah loves his daughter only because she can make him rich through her work in the women’s liberation movement. The meeting between Olive and Selah had “the stamp of business. It assumed that complexion very definitely when she crossed over to her desk and wrote Mr. Tarrant a cheque for a very large amount.” Without hesitation Olive then commands, “Leave us alone—entirely alone—for a year, and then I will write you another” (176). This scene hearkens back to the widely-read narratives of Harriet Ann Jacobs and Douglass, both of whom were purchased from their southern masters by white patrons. James’s word choice also resonates on a deeper level: in buying Verena, Olive casts a distinctly black hue on the “complexion” of this business transaction. Only too happy to comply, Selah has given up his only daughter for a hefty sum by the chapter’s end.

Once Verena is safely purchased, Olive begins educating her about the history of women’s oppression. Olive takes great pride in effecting a racial and sexual “uplift” of sorts, taking Verena away from her father and turning her into a more visible spokeswoman for sexual liberation. The way Olive does so is also connected to the white patron/escaped slave narrative: she takes her abroad for a speaking tour. Numerous slaves had made names for themselves at home and abroad after escaping from southern bondage—Jacobs, Douglass, and Sojourner Truth among the most notable. Not coincidentally, these figures also advocated (to one degree or another) women’s suffrage and liberation.

Under Olive’s guidance (or perhaps ownership), Verena must fulfill all the duties expected of her: she will stay true to the cause of women’s liberation and she will *not* marry any prospective suitor, especially Basil Ransom. In Olive’s opinion, she is not possessing Verena but merely saving her: “You must be safe, Verena—you must be saved; but your safety must not come from your having tied your hands” (152). Ironically, Olive echoes the paternalistic rhetoric of southern masters, who argued that slavery was in the best interest of slaves because they lacked the intellectual and mental wherewithal to live in a free world. Nevertheless, her bondage metaphor is distinctly racial and libidinal. The enamored Olive cannot bear to let Verena loose, especially to the conservative former slave owner

Ransom; if so, the loss would be tantamount to Verena being thrown back into slavery, almost as if that is literally where she had come from. The point becomes even clearer when Olive bluntly states that Ransom has “the delicacy of one of his own slave drivers” (363), and, therefore, Verena must steer clear of him at all costs.

Numerous critics have argued that Basil and Olive, almost paradoxically “unified” by their desire for Verena, are involved in a doppelgänger relationship. For Thomas F. Bertonneau, “It appears that Olive and Basil become rivals from [the moment they meet Verena]. More than models and rivals, they become doubles, converging disastrously on the same object, the initially characterless Verena herself” (60). Bertonneau’s point is worth further consideration not just because the two protagonists are similar in their love for the same woman, but because they attempt to give form and substance to one who seems so “characterless.” Olive manages to give Verena form through erotically racializing her. Ransom, too, is invested in this project, as Verena’s exotic allure and possible lesbianism pique his sexual curiosity. In the process of wooing Verena, Ransom will have to work through his own libidinal desire, ultimately to claim her through marriage as a model of virtuous southern womanhood.

I read Ransom as anxious about Verena’s sexual “instability” because failing to domesticate this attractive New Woman will further cripple his sense of masculinity. He understands from the outset that visiting the “city of reform” will be a test of his manhood. As Olive’s sister, Mrs. Luna, tells him in the novel’s opening pages, Olive “would reform the solar system if she could get hold of it. She’ll reform you, if you don’t look out” (38). As a former slaveholder and a staunch believer in the southern patriarchal order, Basil feels doubly besieged by these remarks. The thought of Olive transforming him hearkens back to female abolitionists of the 1830s such as Maria W. Stewart, who publicly castigated black and white men alike for caring more about “gambling and dancing” than opposition to slavery (qtd. in Romero 63). To succumb to Olive’s radical program would compromise his manhood in other ways as well. Abolitionist men often sought a model of masculinity quite different from the one of acquisitive aggression that was becoming so prominent in the business communities of mid-nineteenth-century America. Modeled chiefly on the meek and androgynous Christ, this new sense of manhood “encouraged expressions of lavish affection between (heterosexual) men. Male friends routinely exchanged kisses when greeting one another and passionate letters when separated” (Wolff 601). A southern aristocrat, Ransom does not feel at home in the industrial-capitalist North, but for him to accept this sentimental version of manhood would alienate him even more from familiar gender norms.

When he meets Verena at Miss Birdseye's, a sexually ambiguous cast of characters in attendance immediately unsettles him. Aside from Olive—whom the narrator has already pinned as being “unmarried by every implication of her being” (47)—there is also Dr. Prance, who “looked like a boy, and not even like a good boy” (67). Noticing how all the women at the meeting flock to Verena once she enters the room, Ransom considers the young suffragist's potential lesbianism. Verena is beautiful, but she is “*disturbingly* beautiful”—that is, her physical appeal has a caveat that might make a southern gentleman pause (239, italics added). As the narrative hints, her character might be marred not only by sexual attraction to other women, but also by a certain racial ambiguity: “The girl was pretty, though she had red hair” (60). The seeming trepidation with which the narrative admits this detail is well worth pondering. Red hair often comes across now, as it did over a hundred years ago, as a sure signifier of Irish blood. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* argues that Irish Americans, despite their obvious phenotype, had an immensely difficult time establishing or claiming their whiteness in the nineteenth century. In the eyes of Anglo-Protestant America during the mid-1800s, the Irish not only brought with them to the New World a distasteful Catholicism, but also a “lower class” status that made many in northeastern cities very anxious. This anxiety, as Ignatiev claims, often coded the Irish in terms of blackness as the two groups “developed a common culture of the lowly” (2).

If red hair signifies a type of “blackness” for Ransom, it also gives that blackness an erotic charge. Ransom feels a furtive thrill in fantasizing about Verena's sexual and racial otherness when he first meets her. She was “such an odd mixture of elements. She had the sweetest, most unworldly face, and yet, with it, an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight, which pervaded even the details of her dress, fashioned evidently with an attempt at the histrionic” (82). Several aspects of this short description are highly suggestive. Being “on exhibition,” Verena has particular resonance in the antebellum southern male imagination as being a black slave who is put up for sale. Indeed, the auction block and the theater shared many performative similarities. Just as a theater production puts actors and actresses before a crowd of paying customers, the slave auction requires its human commodities to speak, flash their teeth, flex their muscles, and show off their agility as a means of making them suitable for commerce. When Olive tells Verena that Basil is becoming one of his own slave-drivers (363), we may very well see him in exactly that role when he assesses Verena's countenance for the first time.

With her “unworldly” face and her “bright, vulgar clothes,” the suffragist also resembles a type of minstrel character (82, 101). Ever since Thomas Dartmouth Rice first “jumped” Jim Crow at New York's Bowery

Theater in 1832, blackface minstrelsy had become the most popular and pervasive form of entertainment in nineteenth-century America. Certainly James would have been familiar with the tradition's various characters and motifs, given its mass appeal. Although women very rarely performed in blackface, the whole minstrel tradition was heavily involved in spoofing and questioning racial purity, class propriety, and even heteronormativity (Lott 51-55). With men dressing up as women and whites dressing up as blacks, minstrelsy left no part of genteel Victorian American society untouched or undefiled. Basil's perception of Verena as a performer implies that she swims in this sexual and racial uncertainty that the world of blackface embodies.

Yet James's narrative provides a significant twist to Verena's "blackface" appearance, for if she really is not "white" under the narrow definition to which Ransom subscribes, the "very pale" Verena might be performing a type of whiteface (82). In this case, the beauty of Verena's "unworldly face" is qualified by an air of falseness that obfuscates her worldly origin. David Roediger has pointed out that much of antebellum minstrelsy's popularity stemmed from its ability to allay white working class fears about blacks. With the black population constantly on the increase in northern industrial cities, whites felt their jobs were in danger (106). If depicting "black" buffoonery tries to cover up a deep-felt anxiety, whiteface works in the opposite direction, showing just how easy it is to mask or obscure one's racial pedigree. As W. T. Lhamon, Jr., explains, "blackface made whiteness a sign, too"—which is to say that the codes and signification of whiteness are just as arbitrarily marked and understood as those of blackness (208). Ironically, Ransom himself is complicit in these arbitrary markings, as he thinks he can "purify" Verena racially and sexually.

Ransom's confusion is further exacerbated by his perception of Verena as "belonging to a troupe." Even when seen beyond the larger world of minstrelsy, nineteenth-century American theater had a reputation for about every kind of "perversity" imaginable. Among them, of course, was "androgyny" (in the form of homosexuality or male/female impersonation), interracial mingling, and miscegenation. In her examination of the 1892 lesbian murder in Memphis, Duggan notes that the world of theater in the late nineteenth century provided a new site of socialization for the emerging New Woman. By coming out of the domestic sphere (even if only for a few hours of entertainment), young white women became susceptible to more subversive and "distasteful" forms of living. Duggan claims that the theater "created a space for diverging or dissenting performances of class, gender, and sexual relations, for complexly ambiguous interpretations of actors' speech and acts, and for forms of shared living and economic support outside the white home" (148). After the murder

and trial had taken place, various media attributed Mitchell's and Ward's sexual inversion to their exposure to the theater. Ransom may suspect that Verena's many speaking engagements across the country have a similar corrupting influence.

Basil's exoticizing and eroticizing of Verena also suggest a larger historical trend among the slaveholding class. As historians of antebellum southern culture have noted, a strong sexual tie often linked masters and women slaves. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, for example, claims that while wholesale application of Freudian paradigms are "always risky," he does understand how the Madonna-Whore complex often worked its way into a white southern man's perception of a female slave. It is no secret that the white plantation matron held particular significance in antebellum southern culture as the emblem of virtue and domesticity. But southern men felt themselves unable to sexualize this woman who purportedly symbolized the best of southern morals. The young southern man also found that he could not compete for the affection of his own virtuous mother in an Oedipal triangle that would involve his father. Wyatt-Brown therefore argues that "[i]n repressing his fantasies, he splits the sexual and affectional impulses in his relations with women. Sex becomes associated with an inferior, an expendable woman whom, outside of wedlock, he both enjoys and socially despises" (319). With regard to Verena, Ransom finds himself caught in a similar Madonna-Whore bind. Insofar as the southerner perceives the beautiful Verena to be the object (or even the initiator) of lesbian desire, she corresponds to the stereotypical black seductress so commonly found in minstrel or fictional representations of the time. True, Ransom wants to "convert" Verena to both heteronormativity and whiteness, yet he revels in the momentary possibility of lesbian desire and the supposed blackness it evokes. More simply put, the challenge excites him in much the same way current-day pornography depicting lesbian sex might be said to tantalize a heterosexual male viewer: if the male viewer could somehow enter into that scene, he thinks that his own masculine attractiveness would redirect the women's libidinal desire onto himself instead of each other.

Nevertheless, Verena's inversion and racial exoticism must eventually give way to whiteness and heteronormativity in Ransom's mind. The challenge before him is worth the struggle only if in the end he can claim his prize, which in this case is a heterosexual and white bride who willingly succumbs to his plan of southern domesticity. Sometime after the novel's midpoint, he tells Verena of his wish to marry her. While trying to win her favor, he reassures her that he wants to preserve her coveted voice:

"Believe me, Miss Tarrant, these things will take care of themselves. You

won't sing in the Music Hall, but you will sing to me; you will sing to every one who knows you and approaches you. Your gift is indestructible; don't talk as if I either wanted to wipe it out or should be able to make it a particle less divine. I want to give it another direction, certainly; but I don't want to stop your activity. Your gift is the gift of expression, and there is nothing I can do for you that will make you less expressive. It won't gush out at a fixed hour and on a fixed day, but it will irrigate, it will fertilize, it will brilliantly adorn your conversation. Think how delightful it will be when your influence becomes really social. Your facility, as you call it, will simply make you the most charming woman in America." (379-80)

Since it was Verena's speeches that erotically bound Olive to her, Ransom suggests that giving her voice "another direction" is to redirect her libidinal impulses toward men instead of women. Under his guidance and "cultivation," that voice will speak instead for the world of the domestic sphere, thus removing her from the public debate concerning the New Woman's full citizenship in America.

Ransom's celebration of domesticity seems to question the "naturalness" of both interracial and homosexual desire. As Sommerville has pointed out, the sexological discourse of the day argued that both interracial and same-sex desire were often codified as "a type of congenital abnormal sexual object choice" (36-37). Ransom himself seems to have been interpellated by this discourse, for his own diction reveals a preoccupation with contrasting images of natural growth and mechanized industry. In marrying Verena and "making" her both heterosexual and white according to Victorian American norms, he denies the possibility he has created in his own mind that her racial pedigree is somehow tainted. Ransom can enact his own type of "irrigation" and "fertilization," using the wedding bed to cultivate her into a stable woman. Intercourse—his own ability to "gush out" with regularity—will be the pivotal act to thwart any unnatural forces that would make Verena sway in her devotion to him or heteronormativity. Ransom's vocabulary also suggests a mechanized counter-image in that phrase. If Verena persists in speaking out "at a fixed hour on a fixed day," she will become so unnatural as to be an automaton, reflecting as well as satisfying Olive's unnatural need for lesbian affection.

Within sexualized and racialized terms, the narrative ultimately gives Ransom the final (albeit qualified) victory over Olive, providing him an assuredly white and heterosexual bride. In the novel's last scene, he whisks Verena away just as she is about to give her suffrage speech before a riotous Boston crowd. The plot's reliance on a conventional ending suggests that the author, as well as his Victorian American readership, quakes at the thought of endorsing more transgressive possibilities of sexual and racial

liberation that the New Woman often embodied. Neither sexually liberated (hetero- or homosexual) women nor newly-freed African Americans can achieve a place in what Shane Phelan calls the "national imaginary." In racializing lesbian desire only to have it succumb to heteronormative whiteness, the novel suggests that neither population has found placement among the "persistent images and rhetoric that, however inadequately and imperfectly, signal to a population who and what it is" (7).

After Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) treated James's "The Beast in the Jungle" to a queer reading, scholars have probed more deeply into the recesses of James's biography.⁵ From the speculative explorations of Graham and others has emerged a general portrait of a man who understood himself to be sexually "inverted" but who also managed to "privatize" his sexual impulses in order to maintain a Victorian sense of propriety. In Graham's opinion, this intimacy may have been nothing more than James writing erotic letters to other men (47-48). Others such as Sheldon M. Novick are more bold in asserting that "[h]istoric fact . . . supports, or is at least consistent with, a portrait of James as a rather conventional, conservatively inclined man—a man who while closeted was sexually active, who was 'homosexual' in the clinical language that my generation uses for such matters" (11). Although James seems never to have felt apologetic or "ashamed" of his same-sex attraction (at least as far as critics can tell), he saw no room for his sexual inclinations to be mentioned or known in the public sphere. To make one's homosexuality visible, as the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895 later proved, could certainly have devastating personal and professional repercussions.

This privatizing impulse is at work in *The Bostonians*. Although James may allude to such lesbian goings-on between Olive and Verena—and though the narrative often has access to Olive's consciousness—the reader will never encounter any *explicit* scenes of lesbian desire. As Terry Castle states, "though we can't see what exactly is 'going on' between Olive and Verena, 'it' nonetheless seems to stare us brazenly in the face" (170). James cuts the reader off from viewing anything that might be too revealing. While at home studying women's history, for example, Olive and Verena "watched the stellar points come out at last in a colder heaven, and then, shuddering a little, arm in arm, they turned away with a sense that the winter night was even more cruel than the tyranny of men—turned back to drawn curtains and a brighter fire and a glittering tea-tray and more and more talk about the long martyrdom of women" (185). We must, therefore, stand on the sidewalk of Olive's Charles Street home wondering about things we cannot see for ourselves. What goes on behind drawn curtains—be it idle conversation or even lesbian sex—is sanctioned in the private sphere, a place where not even the reader is allowed.

From this safe narrative distance, there is even a hint of tenderness to the scene, suggesting that James does not necessarily condemn lesbian desire. David Van Leer insists that “[t]he negative implications of the process by which readers identify Olive’s lesbianism do not mark James’s personal discomfort with homosexual passion. . . . James’s problem with homosexuality concerns not its moral dimension, but the ways in which it can be represented in literature” (101, 102). To Van Leer’s assertion I might add the issue of homosexuality’s representation in the larger realm of American national expression. James’s deeper reservation lies not in Olive’s homosexuality, but in her insistence on making Verena’s sexuality a public issue. Verena would then become just as much a “slave” to Olive’s public ambition as she does to Ransom’s domestic one. Olive loses Verena for good when the young woman is about to make her Boston public debut. In absconding with Ransom, Verena escapes from the many devious characters—Mathias Pardon and Selah Tarrant most notably—who want selfishly to capitalize on her public name.

Also through racializing Verena and placing her within a white patron/escaped slave narrative, Olive doubly devalues James’s coveted realm of privacy. Thus his thoughts on homosexual (in)visibility roughly parallel his attitudes concerning racial (in)visibility. *The American Scene*, James’s account of his 1904-05 visit to the United States, shows the particular difficulty the author had in conceiving of blacks as having a place in the postbellum national imaginary. In this book James can only imagine blacks to be “alien,” never a part of America’s larger depiction of itself (Caramello 454). For example, when watching several African Americans loitering about the streets of Richmond, Virginia, James registers shock at the scene: the free black, “all portentous and ‘in possession of his rights as a man,’” is the same “Southern black as [America] knew him not” (*American Scene* 276).

A later chapter in *The American Scene* recounts James leaving Charleston, South Carolina, for Florida. Boarding the train, he finds that a black porter had indifferently dropped his luggage in the mud. While claiming that at this moment James sees the porter as embodying “physical and social mobility” and thus symbolizing blacks’ entry into the American imaginary, Sara Blair also acknowledges how the ubiquity of black porters in Pullman cars had often evoked “the most trenchant anxieties of racial purity and social mastery” among whites (202). Indeed, the porter’s appearance in this memory shows how little James (or indeed white America) acknowledged blackness within the body politic unless it was, as Blair says, as a servant who helps facilitate the larger “ethos of [white] bourgeois self-making” (202). The only way that James can imagine race infused within the national imaginary is in a decidedly pre-bourgeois, an-

tebellum southern context. Immediately after he sees the porter drop the baggage into the mud, he meditates on how “[o]ne had remembered the old Southern tradition, the house alive with darkies for the honor of fetching and carrying” (*American Scene* 312). The porter’s apparent insolence triggers James to imagine a time of greater social regimentation when blacks had no legally recognized subjectivity, a time when any effrontery would almost surely invite a trip to the whipping post. Since emancipation, the role of American blacks had changed dramatically, but neither James nor the country for whom he purports to speak can conceive of blacks as a part of mainstream postbellum life.

This sentiment sheds light on *The Bostonians*. In one particular scene Verena and Ransom visit Harvard’s Memorial Hall, a building erected to commemorate “the sons of the university who fell in the long Civil War” (246). Realizing that the Mississippian might not feel comfortable visiting a memorial for Union soldiers, Verena tells Ransom that perhaps they are better off not to enter. Overtaken by curiosity, Basil remains unfazed:

[T]hey lingered longest in the presence of the white, ranged tablets, each of which, in its proud, sad clearness, is inscribed with the name of a student-soldier. The effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn, and it is impossible to feel it without a lifting of the heart. It stands there for duty and honour, it speaks of sacrifice and example, seems a kind of temple to youth, manhood, and generosity. Most of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place—names often without other history, and forgotten Southern battles. (246)

James uses Memorial Hall as an indication of what symbols, attitudes, and sentiments clearly have been admitted into the postbellum national imaginary. Worth considering is what the narrative leaves out of this description. While the Civil War was fought in large part to liberate and patriate almost four million slaves, there is no such mention of race in the passage. Implicitly enshrined upon Memorial Hall’s “white, ranged tablets” are what James sees as Anglo-American virtues of “duty and honour,” “sacrifice,” “youth, manhood, and generosity.” When we speak of America, James implies, these are the qualities that we dare mention. Gesturing toward white solidarity, Memorial Hall even goes so far as to commemorate southern battles (and presumably the white southerners who fought in them), but once again, the narrative stops short of making room in the national imaginary for blackness.

Similarly, Memorial Hall implicitly ennobles heteronormative virtues of manhood and womanhood. The stone tablets suggest that student-soldiers, guided by inner principles of duty and courage, claimed their right-

ful place as men within a traditionally gendered framework. Had these men survived the war, they surely would have been expected to return to Harvard, graduate, enter the marketplace or politics, and get married. The “singularly noble and solemn” atmosphere also holds sway over Verena, impressing upon her the “true” virtue of heteronormativity—of men who live up to their full potential as men. Obviously in awe of Ransom’s own sense of manhood, she silently “sat down on a low stone ledge, as if to enjoy the influence of the scene” (246). Her attitude shown here anticipates her repudiation of lesbianism by the end of the novel. In this scene Verena is not depicted as “unstable”; instead, she is impressed by the public, heteronormative virtues that the hall represents, and she accepts her “low,” fixed position on the stone ledge. After reading this scene, one need not be too surprised to find the southerner winning her over by the novel’s end.

Earlier I claimed that the *The Bostonians*’s denouement reinscribes a patriarchy that can imagine neither blackness nor the sexually “unstable” New Woman in the national imaginary. Yet in the novel’s closing passages, James seems to second guess his own ending: “But though [Verena] was glad [to leave the company of the suffragists], [Ransom] presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she was in tears. It was to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed” (433). These are not the tears of one who is fully prepared to move south to the plantation, presumably to live alongside Basil’s sister and mother in a state of white, heterosexual contentment. The great irony with which James leaves his reader is that Verena is still a fugitive, somewhat akin to the state Olive Chancellor found her in at the beginning of the novel. James’s closing lines almost completely undo what it took him over four hundred pages to tie together.

So where has James left us by the novel’s last sentence? In a white, heteronormative patriarchy? Or perhaps in a new ideological and artistic frontier that anticipates a more inclusive national imaginary? James’s calculated yet frustrating choice to make Verena an empty vessel only adds to our demand for definite answers. But perhaps the reason this novel is *most* American—recall that the author wanted to write “a very *American* tale”—is because its movement into the future beyond the Boston Music Hall is fraught with peril. James’s ambivalent, inconclusive ending is perhaps the best one imaginable, for if the author, publishing his novel in 1886, knew at the time how to negotiate race and sexuality through the figure of the New Woman, it is certainly something later writers and thinkers could not easily resolve. The issues with which James grappled almost 120 years ago are still very much a part of our current national conversation.

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Notes

I would like to thank David Leverenz, Amanda Pettit-Shaheen, Andrew Reynolds, Jessica Livingston, and Jeffrey A. Rice for all their help in the development of this essay.

¹The issues Siobhan B. Sommerville explores in her study have opened up a number of avenues in queer theory, race theory, and literary criticism. Sommerville sees the discourse of race and sexuality intersecting at three basic points. First, sexologists attempted to prove through comparative anatomy that (white) homosexuals had similar bodily features to blacks. For example, "[o]ne of the most consistent medical characterizations of the anatomy of both African-American women and lesbians was the myth of an unusually large clitoris" (27). Secondly, just as race theorists of the time attempted to classify individuals along a "continuum" of absolute whiteness and blackness (with the mulatto holding a place in the middle), sexologists attempted to classify sexual inverts along similar lines. Somewhere between the axes of heterosexual men and women existed what sexologist Edward Carpenter termed the "intermediate sex," that is, persons with same-sex desire (170). And finally, sexology and scientific discourse theorized that both same-sex and interracial desire were "unnatural," and therefore they were types of psychological perversion.

² The term "New Woman," however, did not come to specify the educated, civic-minded woman until 1894 when British novelist Ouida used it in a series of published debates with fellow novelist Sarah Grand. For two studies that examine the New Woman's controversial place within modernity see Rita Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) and Laura Behling's *The Masculine Woman in The United States, 1890-1935* (2001). Wendy Graham also notes that James was able to keep current with the developing homosexual discourse through brother William, who was a psychologist and medical doctor (4). Moreover, James vaguely knew John Addington Symonds, the famous homosexual sexologist whose *Problem in Greek Ethics: Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion* appeared three years before publication of *The Bostonians* (Graham 32). Afraid he might be implicated in a scandal himself, James only used the initials J. A. S. when referring to Symonds in correspondence with friends (Graham 29).

³ For example, Lionel Trilling argues that Olive lives a life of "homosexual chastity" (151). Mildred E. Hartsock claims that the "portrayal of Olive Chancellor is a precise anatomizing of a hapless Lesbian love" (301). For David Van Leer, "whether she is finally judged tragic or pathetic, Olive Chancellor is certainly the first fully conceived lesbian protagonist in modern fiction" (93).

⁴ For further reading on the narrow definitions of whiteness in the nineteenth century, see David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) and Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Constructions of Whiteness* (1993). For the historical conflation of blackness and Jewishness see Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Sander Gilman's *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (1985), and Jonathan Freedman's *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (2000).

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims that part of the reason it has been so difficult to speculate on James's possible homosexuality is that he and his works have been protected by conservative critics: "It is possible that critics have been motivated in this active incuriosity by a desire to protect James from homophobic misreadings in a perennially repressive sexual climate. It is possible that because of the asymmetrically marked structure of the heterosexist discourse, any discussion of homosexual desires or literary content will marginalize him (or them?) as, simply, *homosexual*" (197, emphasis in original).

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