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Title: To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature

Author(s): Jonathan Veitch .

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In the 1914 afterword to his play *The Melting Pot*, Israel Zangwill observes, "However scrupulously . . . America avoids physical intermarriage with the Negro, the comic spirit cannot fail to note the spiritual miscegenation which, while clothing, commercialising, and Christianising the ex-African, has given 'rag-time' and the sex-dances . . . to white America" ([New York: Macmillan, 1909], 207). As Zangwill knows, the African cannot be Americanized without Africanizing America in the process. This bold recognition of the thoroughly miscegenated nature of American culture, however limited, is at odds with the more conservative reputation which the figure of the melting pot enjoys as a coercive mechanism of Anglo-Saxon domination. Until recently, Zangwill's formulation was at odds with the well-meaning but misguided attempts on behalf of multiculturalism to carve out distinct and separate bodies of ethnic literatures. As Eric Sundquist himself points out, "Multiplicity need not imply randomness or the splintering of a society or a culture into so many discrete and uncommunicating pieces defined along essentialist lines of race (or gender, class, sexuality, and so

on)" (18). If the concept of "separate but (and) equal ... never worked in law, why should it work in literary criticism?" (22). The two recent studies under review have gone a long way toward overcoming the cordon sanitaire which has effectively divided ethnic studies from "mainstream" American culture (to the impoverishment of both). These meticulously researched and voluminous cultural histories - each more than five hundred pages long - represent major scholarly achievements that promise to reshape their respective fields. Their significance is due in no small part to their concern with putting race at the center of America's national culture. Instead of merely including African Americans in a literary canon that remains essentially unchanged, the introjection of race challenges Sundquist and Douglas to redefine "the premises and inherent significance of the central literary documents of American culture" (Sundquist 7). For Sundquist, this results in a radical and illuminating "reconstruction" of texts and concerns. That reconstruction does not, however, impose a false unity on a multiplicity of American literatures. As Sundquist points out, "multiplicity does imply some level of contention and dissonance. It also implies the necessity of living with the paradox that 'American' literature is both a single tradition of many parts and a series of winding, sometimes parallel traditions that have perforce been built in good part from their inherent conflicts" (18). For Douglas, on the other hand, the inclusion of race does not make for any significant alteration of the literary canon so much as a mind-numbing expansion of its scope. The difference in their respective strategies offers the reader an opportunity to explore the "difference" that race makes (or does not make) in the reconstruction of American culture. In Sundquist's case, that reconstruction means an emphasis on minor texts by major authors - Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (the second of his three autobiographies), and Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* - as well as "serious treatment" ...

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