

Poultney Bigelow at the Turn of Nineteenth Century America

—Imperialism, Colonialism and Race

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Introduction

Recent scholarship challenges the concept of American exceptionalism. American Studies neither views nor articulates enough the complexities of the relationship of the United States to the rest of the world. This inadequacy arose because the desire to singularize the notion of the American experience was so great and the need to oversimplify its construction was so pervasive. New scholarship demands that the colonization of what became the United States, the formation of the nation and of the consequent American empire involved a complex series of negotiations, violent encounters and attempts to define differences among various groups. As a result, any critique of past and contemporary American experience must examine the nature of national unity as that unity represents the nexus of racial, class and gender differences.⁽¹⁾

The focus on Poultney Bigelow (1855–1954) is to examine the man who stood at the crossroads of changing race, gender and class at the turn of the 19th century. His life and time shed light on the transitional period of American nation building. He shared the disappointment of many with post-Civil War America. He shared racism as well. His con-

cept of race was the opposite of the affirmation of differences that we cherish now. He was a product of an age marked by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1881, the Haymarket riot of 1886, the Daws Act of 1887, the Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the war of 1898 and the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904. He wrote books about colonialism and national expansion, under the titles of *White Man's Africa*⁽²⁾ and *The Children of the Nations*⁽³⁾. His message was clear: that Africa was the last frontier for white men's conquest; and as the title suggests, he thought that Africans were like children who needed proper guidance by the white man.

Not only prejudiced and erroneous, his writings lack critical analysis and are mostly anecdotal. Yet he was regarded as an expert on colonization in turn-of-the-century America. He traveled extensively and was able to offer first-hand observations. He wrote regularly for *Harper's Magazine* and reviewed books in professional journals. He was a member of many professional organizations, most of which were then in embryonic stages of development: they included the American Historical Association, the American Political Science Association, and the American Geological Society. His wide correspondence with fellow Americans included Henry George, Mark Twain, Israel Zangwill, Theodore Dreiser, Frederic Remington, Margaret Sanger and many other figures from literature, art and politics to their counterparts in Great Britain, Germany and Japan.⁽⁴⁾

I argue in this paper that Poultney Bigelow represents the change in climate of opinion in the United States from old-fashioned colonialism to imperial empire. He represented the last expression of overt Anglo-American white supremacy. The new era demanded a national unity in-

cluding “colored races”, no matter how they were classified. The quest for national unity became a more focused quest for a strategy of American expansion. Bigelow’s overt racism, which included a hatred of mixed marriages and his attack on missionary activities because in his thinking they would produce a Christian population capable of casting ballots, were considered dangerous. His praise of Japanese colonial activities and the role he took as a Japanese propagandist were also considered threatening. His advocacy of Japan as an emerging power across the Pacific contradicted the developing American image of a Pacific empire. Poultney Bigelow represented the opposite of the paths that the United States was choosing to take.

I . Bigelow, Colonialist

Poultney Bigelow was born in New York in 1855. His father, John Bigelow, was at that time co-owner and coeditor of the *New York Evening Post* with William Cullen Bryant. He was appointed by Abraham Lincoln as United States consul in Paris; after the war, he was named minister to France. Consequently Poultney Bigelow was educated in France, Germany and the United States. In Berlin in the early 1870’s, he was invited to become a playmate of Prince William of Hohenzollern, later to become the Emperor William II of Germany.

Poultney Bigelow entered Yale in 1873 and graduated in 1879, with a two-year hiatus during which, for health reasons, he took passage aboard a sailing ship bound for the Orient. He was shipwrecked off the coast off Japan and was luckily rescued.

After college Poultney Bigelow studied law and practiced for short periods of time from the early 1880’s until semi-retirement in 1906. He

was active largely as a journalist and author based in New York and London and he traveled extensively. Poultney Bigelow's father tried to give his son all possible advice to assure his success---from commenting on his manuscripts and advising which books to read to checking his grammar.⁽⁵⁾ Looking back, it seems that the only area in which Poultney Bigelow surpassed his father's achievements was his own experience in overseas adventure. This experience, however, was essential to his extensive knowledge of the subject of colonization. One, *The Children of the Nations*, opens as follows:

This brief work is an attempt to explain the influence which the mother country exerts upon colonies, and which colonies in turn exert upon the mother country---for good or evil.⁽⁶⁾

It seems as if he cared for the reciprocal development of both the colonizer and the colonized. In actuality he did not. His work was a general survey of colonial experience from a white-supremacy point of view, based on his personal observations and anecdotes. He proposed establishing a National University for the study of subjects in which a colonial official should be proficient. He envisioned this school as, to use his term, a kind of "Colonial West Point."⁽⁷⁾ Complaining about what he considered Washington's chaos, he said it was not exerting enough leadership in colonial administration. In the end he put forth what he called a cosmopolitan plan of colonialism. He says,

There is a great advantage to the white race in colonizing the world on a more cosmopolitan plan than merely by a colonial replica of the mother country. ...Colonists do not know the narrow nationalism that rages in the home countries. ...The colonist that settles un-

der his own flag and sees only those of his own way of thinking, gains something of breadth and political experience, but he who benefits most is one who emerges from the poisonous atmosphere of international recrimination and in the course of a few day's steaming emerges in a community where men of all nation are working shoulder to shoulder in the task of subduing nature---governing native races---carrying on commerce---developing the resources of the earth.

These are the people that profit most by the precious lesson of colonization, these are the ones that should be encouraged by the home government, these are the true missionaries, the men who smooth away race friction, who cast aside national spites, who pave the way for the millennium of Free Trade---good will among nations.⁽⁸⁾

Soon after the publication of *the Children of the Nations*, Poultney Bigelow was invited by Boston University to present a lecture series entitled "National Expansion."⁽⁹⁾ His lecture notes were based largely on that book. Significantly, because of strong opposition from the faculty, he did not present a lecture drawn from the book's chapter entitled "Negro".

Ever since he wrote *White Man's Africa* in 1900, Poultney Bigelow's position on race was clear. He believed that "the negro is not the equal of the white man."⁽¹⁰⁾ "The Anglo-Saxon and the Boer of South Africa are the only peoples that have kept their blood untainted---and this is one secret of their power over native races."⁽¹¹⁾ He was against missionary work, because he believed it fostered empowering blacks to casting ballots. The debasement of the colonized was not an unfamiliar argument. For example, the demarcation between imperialist and anti-impe-

rialist was best understood in that the former advocating annexation because they believed the natives should be suppressed, and the latter, the anti-imperialists, strongly opposed annexation because of their belief that the natives were not capable of being educated to the point of equality with whites, and so would not exert their liberty responsibly.⁽¹²⁾

But Poultney Bigelow went further. According to his handwritten notes and comments to his father, Poultney Bigelow was against the technological and industrial training proposed by Booker T. Washington in his book, *The Future of the American Negro*.⁽¹³⁾ For Poultney Bigelow, Negroes must not be raised, by any means, to the higher level of the white race. Yet it was precisely compatibility and a disciplined work ethic that were required of all members of the diverse American society at the turn of the century. Washington was trying to convince his audience of exactly that point, by proving that African Americans could contribute to the larger society.⁽¹⁴⁾ At Boston University, it was Poultney Bigelow's strongly stated and absolute rejection of Washington's thesis that blocked his appointment to a permanent position on its faculty.⁽¹⁵⁾

Poultney Bigelow's repulsion of "mongrelization" caused his only concern about the colonialism that he proposed. This was his fear of miscegenation between the white male settlers and the female native population, which would severely mar the expansionist policy he supported. His remedy was to make white women's life in the tropics as tolerable as possible so that they could join their husbands. The American Home was presented as the core of American Expansion. He suggested free transportation and free housing for white settlers, and better schools for their children, with the best policy being to send married couples to the colonies.⁽¹⁶⁾ His argument was supported by his idea of

who constitutes the emerging empire.

Poultney Bigelow's concept of colonialism was clear in simply requiring segregated white settlements for administration. His concept, however, completely lacked any critical arguments on marketing and trading, although he said he was a free trader. At home, in America, his strong belief in Anglo-American superiority to other white groups and his avowed racism and support of segregation were problematic, as the country sought to incorporate its diverse immigrant population and a unified South into an American industrial work force. Finally, because Poultney Bigelow believed that the American home, as he defined it, is the core of colonialism, his concept of colonialism promoted a particular gender order that served to solidify a white Anglo-American legacy.

II . Bigelow in Japan

After Poultney Bigelow was asked to leave Boston University, he retired to his house in Catskill, New York. It was Japan that brought him out of his semi-retirement and back to center stage. Japan offered an excellent example to examine the nature of his concept of colonialism. As an expert on Japanese administration of her colonies, he became a savior for Japanese officials facing anti-immigration laws in the United States. He collaborated with his Japanese friend from Yale, Yoshio Kusaka, and with Japanese officials and, with financial backing from Japanese ocean liner companies, he advocated that Japan be treated as the preeminent Asian nation.

Poultney Bigelow's first encounter with Japan was in 1876 when, to recover from nervous prostration incurred at Yale University, he undertook a voyage to the Orient. His ship, *The Surprise*, was shipwrecked

and drifted to Uruga Harbor in Japan. In his autobiography, he described his initial impression: “we saw a swarm of semi-naked savages brandishing tomahawks.”⁽¹⁷⁾ Later, after he was rescued and stayed in the household of a Uruga farmer, he was struck by the cleanliness, courtesy and helpfulness of its members and changed his mind about the “savages.” Yet Japan at that time, still unstable following the Restoration, confined foreign residents to the settlement areas. However, thanks to his credentials as a son of an important figure, he was helped by General Thomas B. Van Buren, U.S. consul-general to Japan, and Judge John A. Bingham. Their backing and support brought him introduction to very important Japanese like Toshimichi Okubo, who led the Meiji Restoration and is regarded as one of the main founders of modern Japan, and Shigenobu Okuma, the 8th and 17th Prime Minister of Japan and founder of Waseda University.⁽¹⁸⁾

Poultney Bigelow visited Japan four more times; his fifth and last visit produced the book *Japan and Her Colonies*.⁽¹⁹⁾ This book belonged to the watershed period of the West’s image of Japan, when that image shifted from that of the intriguing exotic Japan to Japan, the threatening menace.⁽²⁰⁾ He said,

I did not go as a tourist in search of dancing girls and flower boats, but as one who had studied on the spot nearly every other system of colonial expansion and had a natural interest in what the newest of great powers might achieve in this difficult field.⁽²¹⁾

He also stated,

In the case of Japan, each of her colonies has its own customs and

ethnological peculiarities---no law can be made in Tokyo that fits the people of all her islands. Consequently she has to exercise great patience in regard to local institutions or prejudices. Japan has done admirably in the colonial field if we look at the essentials. She has commenced by making her police respected, by clearing the country of highwaymen and making piracy unprofitable.⁽²²⁾

His analysis, however, did not consider the feelings and anger of the colonized people themselves, or of the humiliations inflicted on them in China and Korea. His boasts about first-hand knowledge omitted this dimension of colonization and did not even include the indisputable fact of the Korean Independence movement of 1919–1920.

He gave a series of lectures at Tokyo University of Commerce. Ei-ichi Shibusawa, who spearheaded the introduction of Western capitalism and founded the first modern bank and joint stock corporations, was sending very high regards upon his lectures.⁽²³⁾

III. Japan and the United States

Considering all of Bigelow's writings on Japan, three themes emerge. The first is his suggestion that Japan and the United States were equals in terms of experience in colonial administration.⁽²⁴⁾ He felt there was much to learn from Japanese experience. "I was here for the purpose of learning what I could of Japanese methods of colonial administration."⁽²⁵⁾ In the back of Poultney Bigelow's mind, the European experience in Africa and other parts of Asia was a failure and did not present a good model for a new empire. American policy in the Philippines was also a failure. "Uncle Sam has devoted to his colonies vastly more money, yet he has not made a success in the Philippines, Cuba or

Alaska.”⁽²⁶⁾ “It is a Congressional notion, wholly original to Washington, that in order to make black, red, brown or yellow people contented, it is only necessary to supply them with a cargo of Bibles, a Life of Lincoln and a “Declaration of Independence.”⁽²⁷⁾

For colonialists, Poultney Bigelow wrote, constructing railroads and ports, and running jails, hospitals and schools were more important than anything else. At the same time, however, he was voicing criticism of and irritation with the conduct of his country’s colonialism. The nature of United States expansion had changed. The old idea of colonial administration was being taken over by the idea of representative democracy for governance and (human) control over native populations.⁽²⁸⁾

He concluded that Japan was exercising the Monroe doctrine of the U.S. on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. He said,

Japan and America would within ten years unite on the lines laid down in our treaty with Canada. The Pacific Ocean would be declared one of the Great Lakes of Peace; not a war vessel would be permitted to vex her waters; the only armed vessels would be protectors of commerce---destroyers of pirates, and police patrols ready to assist mariners in distress.⁽²⁹⁾

From what he wrote, we can conclude that he believed that the idea of Asia for Asiatics was legitimate.⁽³⁰⁾ It was totally unacceptable, however, when the United States began thinking of that other side of the sea as Pacific America.

Underlying the second and third themes of Poultney Bigelow’s writ-

ings on Japan was his conviction that, in the racial hierarchy, the Japanese were a superior race. He held this view in good part because of Japan's success, in his eyes, in terms of colonial administration.

The second theme, then, flowing from this conviction in Japanese superiority, were his efforts to reduce the fear of the Japanese in California. He even suggested that racially the Japanese were not a threat and he went on to say that mixed marriages did not seem to do harm. "As to Japanese or Chinese blood mixing with other blood, I see no reason yet for stirring up eugenically alarm."⁽³¹⁾ He criticized labor organizations and sensationalist messages of yellow journalism that agitated against the Japanese. His dislike of some newspaper came from his hatred of what he called, pejoratively, "the Jewish Press". He even said that it would be better to have Japanese immigrants than Jewish newcomers.⁽³²⁾ His advocacy of the former, however, came too late to have any effect on public opinion in California. The next year, 1924, saw the total exclusion of Japanese from the United States, according to its new immigration law.

Ardent colonialist and racist that he was, Poultney's assessment of Japan was unusual and unacceptable from the viewpoint of the United States. It should be recalled that he was attacking the arguments of the ideological superiority of the United States expansion and its exportation of representative democracy, and also the missionary idea of racial uplift. Considering the fact that the United States moved toward more strategic commercial and technological policies and, most importantly, emphasized human control of the world, Poultney Bigelow's message was doomed to purging from the future U.S. identity.

The focus of the third theme in Poultney Bigelow's writings about Japan was his excitement at meeting members of the Ainu people and the native population of China.⁽³³⁾ He had been similarly thrilled to meet African kings in his travels to Africa.⁽³⁴⁾ Poultney Bigelow's fascination with these strangers coexisted with his conviction that they had to be suppressed as exotic people, by colonizers. They were never to be considered as equals to the colonizers.

This theme of excitement and adventure was also the shared sense of a member of the Ends of the Earth society, which Poultney Bigelow founded in 1905 just before his several trips to Japan.⁽³⁵⁾ The club's members were travelers like him and, like him, most were also racist, expansionist and anti-imperialist in their beliefs; yet it was their encounters with "savagery" that had been needed and had served for so long to satisfy the spirit of the white male appetite.

An example of that spirit is provided by a biographer of Frederic Remington.⁽³⁶⁾ The famous artist drew illustrations for *The Outing Magazine*, the first periodical devoted to adventure and health, which Poultney Bigelow helped to found in 1895. The biographer noted that Remington needed exotic encounters to remind him of his strength and manliness. Remington and Poultney Bigelow, Yale classmates, were close friends. They shared a need for these encounters with the untamed frontier and "ferocious" natives. Their adventurous spirit saw the world as waiting to be colonized.

Poultney Bigelow welcomed the Japanese as partners in colonizing that world. He shared their view of themselves as superior members of the yellow race. They, in turn, treated him as a very important person,

by providing Foreign Office officials to escort him and even permitting him to meet with the empress, the first time she “had done such an honor to a non official of any country.”⁽³⁷⁾ Poultney Bigelow’s description of that visit, detailing her gracious manners and the proportions of her pleasing physical appearance, shows how his racial and gender hierarchy informed his view of Japan.

Conclusion

Poultney Bigelow was not able to use either his privileged background or his extensive experience in traveling to achieve success. His first-hand observations were welcomed by the readers of certain journals but his racism and his judgment on colonial powers were unacceptable, when considered against the development of the U.S. during that period. He was racist when the U.S. tried to incorporate the South and Blacks and immigrant populations as productive laborers. His idea of Japanese expansion was also unacceptable when the United States was forging its own idea of an American Pacific. His attack on the United States’ ideological reasoning for expansion was, again, against the trend of the emerging United States’ diplomatic ideal. Most importantly, that ideology was the core of American exceptionalism, making it unique.

He had been seeking fame like his father, but never attained it. The only possible way to achieve his desired recognition was to gather important people under the banner of the End of the Earth. He was to pursue his search for undiscovered fields of adventure with a boy’s willingness to go to the “ends of the earth.” Poultney Bigelow was a product of his era and, when we consider the terms “imperialism”, “colonialism”, “empire” and “American exceptionalism”, his experience demands a more nuanced reading of the terms themselves and the age to which he belonged.

Notes

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- (2) Poultney Bigelow, *White Man’s Africa*, London & New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900.
- (3) Poultney Bigelow, *The Children of the Nations: A Study of Colonization and Its Problems*, New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1901. Though never published, *From the Ends of the Earth* (ca. 1900–1914), is also on Colonialism. Poultney Bigelow Papers (PB

- Papers) The New York Public Library, Box 21.
- (4) Letters to Poultney Bigelow from notable persons, Box 8, 9, 10. in PB Papers, NYPL
 - (5) John Bigelow to his son, June 27th 1893, Jan.16 1905, Feb. 27th 1905, Apr. 13 1905, Dec. 21st 1906, Bigelow to his father Feb. 18. 1905, in PB Papers, NYPL, Box 2 and 3.
 - (6) *The Children of the Nations*, vii.
 - (7) Ibid.
 - (8) Ibid., pp. 357–358.
 - (9) Notes for lectures on “National Expansion” given at Boston University, N0.1–No.25 (1904–1905) PB Papers, NYPL, Box 41 and Miscellaneous writings, lectures and notes relating to colonialism, PB Papers, NYPL, Box 42.
 - (10) *The Children of the Nations*, p. 107.
 - (11) Ibid.
 - (12) Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve against Empire: The Anti–Imperialists 1898–1900*, (1968), Chicago: Imprint Publications, Inc. 1992. Jim Zwick, “The Anti–Imperialist Movement, 1898–1921” in *Confronting Imperialism: Essays on Mark Twain and the Anti–Imperialist League*, West Conshohocken, PA: Infinite Publishing. Com., 2007.
 - (13) Memo attached on Notes for lectures on “National Expansion” No.13, PB Papers, NYPL, Box 41, and Letter to his father, Jan.11, 1908, PB Papers, NYPL, Box 3. Poultney Bigelow, *Seventy Summers*, Vol. II , London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1925, pp.227–228, p.232.
 - (14) William B. Gatewook, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man’s Burden 1898–1903*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975 and Martha Banta, *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in to the age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford*, Chicago & London: University of

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- (15) Poultney Bigelow, *Seventy Summers*, Vol. II, pp.229–231.
- (16) “Can The White Man and His Wife Flourish in the Tropics” in Chapter XXXII in *The Children of the Nations*, pp.330–343.
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- (18) Aaron M. Cohen, “The Japan Connections of Poultney Bigelow: Proponent of Japanese Immigration and Colonialism,” *Nanzan Review of American Studies*, Volume 23 (2001): 65–81.
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- (20) Peter O’Connor, “Japanese Propaganda Books in the Modern Period: Writing against the Tide,” in *Japanese Propaganda: Selected Readings, Series I: Books, 1872–1943*, Series Editor, Peter O’Connor, Vol.1, Tokyo: Edition Synapse, 2004, pp.1–36.
- (21) Poultney Bigelow, *Seventy Summers*, Vol. II, p.216. *Japan and Her Colonies*, p.14.
- (22) *Seventy Summers*, Vol. II, p.216. *Japan and Her Colonies*, p.100.
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- (24) *Japan and Her Colonies*, p.257.
- (25) *Ibid.*, p.57.
- (26) *Seventy Summers*, p.217.
- (27) *Ibid.*, p.317.

- (28) *Japan and Her Colonies*, p.86, pp.236–237.
- (29) *Ibid.*, p.47.
- (30) *Ibid.*, p.121.
- (31) *Ibid.*, p.195–196.
- (32) *Seventy Summers*. p.213.
- (33) *Japan and Her Colonies*, p.71, and Chapter XIII.
- (34) *Seventy Summers*, p.239.
- (35) “Ends of the Earth” society (organized 1903, 1904–1952), PB Papers, NYPL, Box 58
- (36) David McCulloch, “Remington”, *Brave Companions: Portraits in History*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992, pp.69–85.
- (37) *Japan and Her Colonies*, p.252.