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Susan L. Mizruchi: The Science of Sacrifice

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Introduction



LITERATURE teaches us how to read the past. That is the large claim of this book. The claim is set out within a correspondingly large narrative: literary, social scientific, and theological voices are brought together to tell their versions of a culture's story. A specific group of literary works has shaped this narrative: a literature with distinctive methods, patterns, and ideas, marked by a preference for social types; by recurrent references to the story of Abraham and Isaac, and to other biblical moments of sparing or purification; and by the concepts of equivalence and exchange. The literature is fiction from the period of American realism and naturalism; the culture is America from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century, a culture defined increasingly by the emerging disciplines of social science. This is a book about reading, or, rather, an infinite regression or progression of reading. For the process I am describing is not only reciprocal but in a sense unbounded. To understand the past is to learn to read it as literature teaches us to. It is also to understand literary authors as readers of texts and to reach beyond these direct engagements to the texts they imply.

I take seriously William Benjamin Smith's *The Color Line* and Frederick L. Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* because Du Bois did, despite their flagrant racism. D. F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and Arthur Schopenhauer's *Will and Idea* also figure prominently in this analysis because of their interest to Melville. In this respect, my book looks like a traditional source study, which it is, in part. As in source studies, interpretation here has at times the feel of detective work. Many of the books that turn out to have mattered to writers like Melville or Du Bois, to sociologists like Edward Ross, Herbert Spencer, or Emile Durkheim—Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872), William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1888–91), Nathaniel Shaler's *The Neighbor* (1904)—are unfamiliar to literary historians, and only slightly more familiar to historians of the disciplines. So there are discoveries here, of unexpected affinities and connections among a variety of writers and books. I am convinced, for instance, that Melville knew *The Martyrdom of Man*, a best-seller in his day. I suspect that Gertrude Stein came across, somewhere, Mauss and Hubert's *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* (1898). Even critical commonplaces—Melville's late preoccupation with Schopen-

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hauer—have afforded some surprises. From the perspective of the issues central to this study, *Will and Idea* provides a new source for the cabin scene in *Billy Budd, Sailor*.

In other respects, however, this book could not be less like a source study. While the object of analysis is sometimes an old and forgotten book, it can also be a postmodern play. This study asks you to imagine a continuum from late-nineteenth-century books of theology and social science that are almost never read today, to books of literature that are still read (mainly in classrooms), to recent popular films, and it asks you to accept this continuum as the key to the meaning of our culture. We understand our cultural present, I argue, only if we understand it, through narrative, as vitally connected to a not-so-distant past. We have inherited this late-nineteenth–early-twentieth-century culture and its dilemmas; we have to learn from its mistakes, because we are its mistakes. “Race matters” of the kind described by Cornell West; the idea of poverty with its standard type, the welfare mother; efforts to distinguish the relative deprivations of race and class in a “classless” society; the ongoing fascination with social Darwinism—all became issues in the century previous to our own. These dilemmas were fixtures of what I will be defining as a “social scientific culture.” My point is twofold: America became a social scientific culture in the late nineteenth century, and our own culture is another, differently complicated version of it.

This study began with a modest insight: the techniques and philosophies of American literary realism and naturalism were comparable to those of an altogether different social practice that happened to share the same time frame, the developing disciplines of social science. This was not a new idea. It could be found in the first responses to this literature and in any influential interpretation of it, from Parrington to New Historicist treatments. These later interpretations, and those that have succeeded them in the 1990s, identify the recognition of “disciplinarity”—an exploration of the relationship between realism and naturalism and other prominent social discourses of the era—as one of the pressing tasks for my generation of critics. The challenge is to grasp the un-literary dimensions of literature while preserving a sophisticated appraisal of its literary qualities, to discover the aesthetic or narrative dimensions of the nonliterary, without losing sight of its objective status as, say, a legal brief or an ethnographic report. This could mean reading the formal properties of texts as expressions of legal or economic developments, or noting that lawyers and anthropologists tell stories too. The main problem with my first ventures in interdisciplinary interpretation was that they seemed to leave the major issues untouched. I could demonstrate that Melville’s preoccupation with the secularization of biblical types led him to anticipate the typological methods of the early social sciences, or that Henry James’s realist passion

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for detailing the characteristics of different social types resembled the psychological discriminations made by his brother. But the question was always, And then what? To begin with the premise of “interdisciplinarity,” it seemed, was to consign oneself to going nowhere.

My dissatisfaction with these limits led me to probe further into the connection between American literature and social science. The result was the discovery of a third element, religion. From a common preoccupation during this period with social types and social control or vigilance, I came to recognize a common preoccupation with religion and sacrifice. The perception of this deeper link came after years of work on the project. I had returned to poring over the literary and social scientific texts that had always seemed to hold the most obvious prospects for interdisciplinary inquiry: Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor*; James’s *The Awkward Age*; Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*; Simmel’s essays, *On Individuality and Social Forms*; Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*; Ross’s *Social Control*. As I contemplated the literary texts, I realized that in each work a sacrifice was the main event—Billy Budd was hung as “a Lamb of God”; Nanda Brookenham was a Levitical Goat, exiled at the novel’s end; Burghardt Du Bois was relinquished in the manner of Abraham’s Isaac. Other American literature, from *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) to *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), also featured sacrificial scenes and ideas. And there were examples in American literary works from earlier and later periods: *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Armies of the Night*, *The Bluest Eye*. There will be occasion to consider some of these other cases in the pages that follow. I want to make it clear, however, that this is not a thematic study. My subject is a specific cultural-historical period and a specific aesthetic and social scientific tradition. I recognized the significance of sacrifice in these literary works and then, almost simultaneously, in Simmel’s definition of value, Weber’s notion of a Protestant ethic, and Ross’s conception of social control. I soon learned that a contemporary literature devoted to sacrifice (and known by most of the social scientists and literary authors of concern to my study) had been written in this period. I think of Robertson Smith’s *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, Mauss and Hubert’s *Sacrifice*, and James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, to name just a few. The discovery of sacrifice not only expanded the canon of this inquiry but proved to be of profound interest to writers who were already integral to it—for example, Herbert Spencer, Edward Westermarck, or Suzan-Lori Parks.

As I complete this book, I have become aware of other studies on close or related topics: Debora Kuller Shuger’s *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (1994); Orlando Patterson’s “The Feast of Blood” (1998); even Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996), which rarely mentions the word, but implies with every vivid documentary detail that the Holocaust was “the sacrifice” of the Jews. I have begun to

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wonder if we are not entering upon our own intellectual season of sacrifice. If we were to conceptualize our current interest in sacrifice from the perspective of Robertson Smith, we might see it as expressing the struggle of intellectuals to define a clear sense of purpose, to grasp the link between academic work and a more general welfare. The morally charged criticism of René Girard, the pioneering reinterpreter of sacrifice, is understandable in these terms. Written in the era of poststructuralism, in the aftermath of the sixties, Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) exemplifies the relationship between a theoretical attraction to sacrifice and anxieties about the marginal status of academic life. Girard was partly drawn to sacrificial violence from disenchantment with what he saw as a poststructuralist abandonment of intellectual authority.¹ There is a lesson here for the return to sacrifice among intellectuals of an earlier era, a story I begin to tell in the chapters that follow.



ONE of the main assumptions of this study is that sacrificial thinking in the late nineteenth century is social scientific thinking.² When realist writers and sociologists undertook to conceptualize the basis of collective life, they discovered sacrifice. Some, like Melville, Tylor, and Robertson Smith, sought their answers in the “precivilized” past, plowing through biblical and classical texts to recover the injunctions of “the ancient Semites.” Others, like Durkheim, Du Bois, and James, intuited the meaning of sociality from the dynamics of modern life. In Du Bois’s case, the situation is even more complex. As a trained sociologist, he was in the unique position of understanding the sacrificial basis of social scientific rationalism, while protesting the routine victimization of his people in the ongoing sacrificial practice of lynching. The concept of sacrifice supplied the logic that allowed these analysts to embrace scientific rationality while retaining their allegiance to religious ideals. This logic was compatible with what Alvin Gouldner termed “the piety of functionalism,” which dominated social science at the point of its emergence and institutionalization as an explicitly modern form of expert knowledge. From the perspective of functionalism, value was defined in terms of loss; global resources were believed to be limited or scarce; and society was characterized as a closed system of alternating checks and balances.³

So deeply embedded is the concept of sacrifice in modern ways of thinking that it can be barely perceptible. It inheres, for example, in superstitious anxieties aroused by good times, as in the saying, “You pay for everything.” It is also evident in perceptions of society’s mysterious interconnectedness, which is captured by another commonplace: “Step on a

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crack, break your mother's back." Such phrases confirm the sense of cruelty and danger lurking in the most homely clichés. In significant ways we remain a culture of oblation. It would not be inaccurate to classify certain postmodern events as forms of sacrificial violence. Consider the "do or die" culture of inner-city youth gangs (about which I will have more to say in chapter 1), and the activities of right-wing White supremacist groups, including those responsible for the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City, conceived as a wrathful act of vengeance. There is also the 1995 ritual slaying of a woman in Framingham, Massachusetts, by her husband, a John Hancock Insurance executive, who beat her to death, and then methodically carved out her heart and lungs and impaled them on a stake in an altarlike formation.⁴ To recognize how the category of sacrifice was transformed by a series of turn-of-the-century novelists and social scientists is not only to recognize habits and beliefs still vital in our own time but to understand the necessity of overcoming them.

A critical aspect of sacrificial thinking at the point of its reformulation as a type of modern rationality was its articulation in terms of kinship. Sacrificial categories tended to oppose (as they had from their inception in ancient times) the interests of "strangers"—immigrants and other sorts of transforming or transformative groups, understood as productive of social instability—to the welfare of "neighbors." These strangers might include groups as formerly familiar as the American working class, whose membership grew increasingly aware in this period of possessing a common identity and concerns that required political organization and redress, and women, whose reform activity was directed toward liberalized divorce laws, abortion, and voting rights. The category "stranger" could also apply to those as relentlessly "alien" as Blacks, a group whose progress—educational, economic, and political—in this period was met by expanded Jim Crow laws and lynchings. It was no accident that sacrificial thinking seemed to coalesce in particular around these groups, which were often perceived as vehicles of modern change.

My interest lies primarily in the question of what meaning sacrifice could have had in a particular context. I concentrate on conceptualizations of sacrifice during the dramatically unsettled turn of the century, when the modernization process was at its height and the modern social sciences were formulating themselves as the preeminent means for mediating it. I identify an integral point of affinity between modern literary and social scientific definitions of "society," ascribing certain views of sociality and conceptions of the sacred as fundamental to a turn-of-the-century intellectual life (primarily American, but also Continental and European) shared by literary authors and social scientists.⁵ I account for the role of social change and conflict, much of it defined in terms of a vast spectacle of social heterogeneity, in the formation of a social scientific culture. I submit the

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following sorts of questions to a series of literary and social scientific works: What seems to be the purpose of the sacrificial rhetoric or action being invoked here? How does it unfold within the context outlined by this group of literary or social scientific works? How is it related to other pieties upheld by the same speakers or agents?

Various aesthetes, scientists, and dilettantes, scholarly as well as popular social analysts, wrote about sacrifice and absorbed sacrificial modes of thinking. They did so while retaining commitments to highly sophisticated disciplinary distinctions. There were, for example, the nervous discriminations of Henry James, who sought to protect his aesthetic domain from encroachment from without (on the part of social scientists like his brother William) and from within (on the part of fellow artists like H. G. Wells, more willing to overlook divisions between science and art). Yet James also wrote learnedly about sacrificial myths, made available in this period by social scientists and classicists (Andrew Lang and Gilbert Murray, for example), whose work he knew.

Because a considerable portion of this book is devoted to literary analysis, and also because I presume less familiarity on the part of many readers with social science, than with literature, I want to spend some time here laying out the groundwork of the sociological ideas that will figure throughout. Let me begin by addressing in general terms the ways in which social scientists have themselves conceived the divide between aesthetic works and their own. Sociologists pursued “rational universals,” categories that were sometimes defined by contrast with the unwieldy particulars designated the province of poets. “Only the universal is rational,” writes Durkheim in *The Division of Labor* (1893), “the particular and the concrete baffle understanding.” Elsewhere, he observes that “in each individual thing reside innumerable properties,” and they must be handled “as do the poets and literary people who describe things as they seem to be, without any rational method” (xviii).⁶ Consider his oppositions: the universal is what can be limited (to a single genus or species) and grasped in rational terms. The concrete is virtually unlimited, open to an unimaginable variation that is best left to “literary people.” The positing of sociology as a form of mediation between a literary ground of limitless particularity and a lost horizon of spiritual transcendence reminds us that social science was at the forefront of debates in this period over the potential for universally shared values. The writings of Durkheim and his protégé Robert Hertz, for example, helped to redirect understanding of events like death, once thought to define the fundamental nature of a common humanity across time and culture and now seen increasingly as an indicator of human variation.

Social science confronted the waning reliability of universal ideals—faith in God, the valuation of human life—by offering its own methods as

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a replacement. Sociology especially, it was hoped, might serve as an instrument of secular recuperation, supplanting religious redemption. It is no surprise to learn that the subject of religion preoccupied these thinkers, no matter how “religiously unmusical” they believed themselves to be.⁷ Almost every important theorist of this era maintained live connections to an influential religious heritage. Durkheim supplies the most obvious example; he seems to have simply transferred his allegiance from the overwhelming Jewish orthodoxy of his youth (“a body of practices,” he writes, “governing all the details of life and leaving little room for individual judgment”) to the equally cohesive modern symbolic system called “society.”⁸ There are many more examples, including Weber, whose Protestant affiliations (filtered primarily through the maternal relation) can be read as the building blocks of his sociology; William Graham Sumner and Albion Small, who trained as Episcopal and Baptist ministers, respectively; and F. H. Giddings, who waged an ongoing struggle against the example of his minister father. This tradition extends to one of the foremost American sociologists of the twentieth century, Talcott Parsons, whose father was a Protestant clergyman. Significantly, every prominent American realist author confronted a powerful (if not always empowering) religious legacy. Take, for instance, Melville’s legendary “quarrel” with the Calvinist God, Stephen Crane’s rebellion against his own minister father, Henry James Jr.’s resistance to Henry Sr.’s Swedenborgianism, and Theodore Dreiser’s exchange of Catholicism for Spencerianism. As Albion Small, a leading American sociologist at the time, observed, “From the first to last religions have been men’s more or less conscious attempts to give finite life its infinite rating. Science can never be an enemy of religion. . . . The more science we have the more are we awed and lured by the mystery beyond our ken.”⁹

Social scientists mourned the decline of universals, but sought to exploit it professionally.¹⁰ Their work became a means of establishing a new order of rational universals: universals that were capable of confronting cultural variation and value relativity in a manner designed to recover what was uniform about them. The lingering particulars, those concrete excrescences that “baffle[d]” social scientists were left to literature. While social science constructs instrumental universals for a new age, the aesthetic inherits the ground of history. Modern social scientific theory thus offers a representative reformulation of the aesthetic as the domain of the concrete and particular. As portrayed by Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and others, works of literature were valuable repositories of how the social was lived and thought. These sociological accounts differed considerably from the classic Marxist position on aesthetics. That formulation, according to John Guillory, “attributed to the domain of the aesthetic the capacity to produce a critique of the capitalist order analogous to, and not at all superseded by,

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the critique produced in such a text as *Capital*.¹¹ Sociologists were committed neither to critique nor to transcendence; they sought instead to capture faithfully the components of a society they understood as more or less immune, like the God of the Hebrews, to their offerings. Classic Marxists claimed for aesthetics a power to probe the logic of contemporary social systems that was equivalent to their own scientific analyses. Sociologists drew a sharper line between their own objectives and those of artists, a contrast that had significant ramifications for their reformulations of the social scientific enterprise itself.

The ideal of descriptive purity they claimed for themselves left literature with a compensatory function in intellectual life. Literature became a historical resource for social science when it needed to draw upon actual examples for support. Yet this still fails to explain the special value of literature, for it seems obvious that historical sources would have provided a more copious supply of “real life” examples. What literary sources offered were not only characters more richly drawn than those in history books but a common storehouse of culturally specific types—both situational and human—whose properties could resonate in a variety of unpredictable ways, depending on the context. Thus, Durkheim turns to Musset and Goethe for illustrations of anomic love in *Suicide* (1895); Weber invokes Tolstoy in “Science as Vocation” (1918), when sociology has reached the limits of its potential to contemplate death; and Franklin Giddings concludes his *Principles of Sociology* (1896) with a quotation from Browning’s “Sordello” that helps to convey the reciprocity between individual genius and the mass of humanity.

The glimmering recognition on the part of sociologists that the meaning of the aesthetic lay in the ends of social science supplies the foundation for my own understanding of the relationship between turn-of-the-century realist-naturalist fiction and sociology.¹² Let me begin with the preoccupations I see as common to them. They include: the decline of universal values and the scientific challenge to religion; the problem of social conflict and order; and the relationship between historical reality and human constructions or social forms, which branches into questions about the relationship between aesthetics and science. One significant expression of this affinity was the formal preoccupation with type categories. Typological method, perhaps more than any other technique, captured the recuperative ambitions of the sociological enterprise. Rational types supplied the means by which universals could be linked to particular social developments, while retaining their power to represent normative standards. They are the basis of Franklin Giddings’s inductive methods, most fully tested in research by his students, who either applied their mentor’s vast typological schemes to particular social settings (Williams’s *An American Town* [1906]) or elaborated their own typology-based theories

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(John Franklin Crowell's *The Logical Process of Social Development* [1898]). They received their most sophisticated treatment in Weber's notion of ideal types.

Weber's description of ideal types is consistent with Durkheim's distinction between the rational clarity of science and the bewildering particularities of aesthetics. The "type," Weber writes, affords the social scientist a view of "the real action, influenced as it is by all sorts of irrational facts (emotional impulses, errors), as a 'deviation' from what might be expected if those performing it had behaved in a fully rational way."¹³ The literary is precisely that region of emotion and error. Weber means ideal, not in the sense of a preferred or improved state, but in the sense of a fully predictable one. The typological methods of social science help us to see acts and events in the uniform and universal frame of reference that is obscured by our experience of them. These methods serve to lift things out of the unfiltered realm of the ordinary into the more rarefied air of scientific understanding. This is not to imply that these sociological methods were necessarily narrowing or blinding. As Franklin Giddings observed in his own discussion of types: "Some sociological categories must be broad enough to include the cannibal and the diner out. . . . Some must be broad enough to include the wise man and the ant."¹⁴ It's important to acknowledge Giddings's overall commitment here (at least methodologically speaking) to variety and inclusiveness. But the politics of Giddings's evolutionary gradient should give us pause. His image of the food chain both reminds us that he remains (intellectually) bound to organicism and confirms the compatibility between modern relativism and social Darwinism. Giddings's image suggests that type categories were understood by social scientists themselves as a critical means for confronting a modern spectacle of heterogeneity. Types provided a social taxonomy, a set of classificatory tools for subordinating historically particular individuals and phenomena to limited universal patterns.

Social scientists *earned* their type categories, drawing them out of an indefinable "infinite" that was resolutely historical. There was an undeniable degree of defensiveness in this: their categories were dikes against what they perceived as ungovernable in their contemporary society. What role could literature play in all this: how did literary writers situate themselves in this era of declining universals, where the rational had in some sense become the universal? There is probably no realist writer better equipped to consider such questions than Henry James, who was in the habit of comparing his own literary aims to the scientific endeavors of his brother William, and who wrote extensive treatises on aesthetics that he appended as prefaces to his major novels. It would not be farfetched to consider these treatises as compendiums of "ideal types," serving to highlight the experiential deviations of the novels they interpret. Among the

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most “scientific” of these treatises, is the preface to *The Awkward Age*, where James adopts a pseudoscientific language of “measurements,” and “symmetries” (9). This is his playful way of emphasizing art’s inability to operate within such constraints. Yet James also insists that the artist must make his own formal “sacrifice,” in keeping with those made by the characters who inhabit its borders. If the matter of art is less “organic” or “real” than the objects studied by social scientists, this only serves to heighten the artist’s apprehension of the relationship between universal and rational forms.

How might one compare a literary category like “common sailor” (Melville) to a sociological category like “delinquent girl” (W. I. Thomas), or a literary definition of habit (Stein’s “servant girl nature”) to a sociological one (Weber’s Protestant ethic)? Writers like Melville use types to enhance uncertainty and ambiguity. They show how the boundary represented by “Common Sailor” cannot possibly contain the burgeoning and variegated American working class, or how a term like “the Awkward Age” does little to untangle the web of social conflicts impinging on reproduction at the turn of the century. According to most of the literature in this study (and there are exceptions to the rule, even within works that mainly fulfill it), types represent a universalizing language of social control that does not begin to encompass all that it attempts to rein in. Literary uses of types therefore tend to be multiple, even parodic. Consider, for example, all the different types heaped on the protagonist of *Billy Budd*, or the way in which Du Bois amplifies and complicates his portrayal of Black American existence from a social scientific typology (*The Philadelphia Negro*) to a more literary one (*The Souls of Black Folk*). As employed by contemporary social scientists, types are most often stabilizing; as employed by a corresponding company of literary writers, they are provisional. Both social scientists and writers extol types, but the writers are more likely to question them.

These distinctions between social scientific and literary uses of types are consistent with their different narrative approaches to sacrifice. The social scientists of my study work primarily at the level of *explanations* and *concepts*, informed by contemporary ethnography, statistics, and historical documents. Sociologists like Durkheim, or Mauss and Hubert, enumerate the details of the sacrificial rite. They tell us how they think these function to sustain social order. Or like Simmel and Weber, they employ a sacrificial rhetoric that lends a special intensity to their arguments, by referring them to a frame of reference that is material and economic, but also solemn, and slightly dangerous. The literary authors of my study *stage* sacrifice. They offer a sacrificial theatre, whose purpose is to question different features of the sacrificial enterprise. This is not a restatement of the subversive hypothesis: the claim that aesthetic form is by definition critical of prevailing social norms. Call it rather the disciplinary

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hypothesis: the self-evident truth that a work of sociology, or anthropology, is designed to fulfill the expectations of a given disciplinary system of explanation. Whereas literature, if not antidisciplinary, might best be understood as supradisciplinary. Yet here too the sacrificial record is somewhat surprising.

For the sacrificial theatres of this book are not confined to aesthetic narratives. Consider the *Tivah* ceremony featured in Robert Hertz's Durkheimian social study *Death and the Right Hand*, a violent mass exercise that culminates in the death of an alien. Or consider Arthur Stanley's portrayal of Hebrew sacrifice as ritual high drama, with "every gesture . . . a kind of moving picture" (see chapter 2 below). Either of these examples, like their literary counterparts, might serve to reveal the deep structure of sacrificial rites. Still, the literary examples work more consistently as second-order reflections. When Du Bois portrays his book as an offering on behalf of a people much sacrificed—or when he contemplates (in his stirring elegy for his son) the morbid characterizations of American Blacks—he is highlighting the practice of sacrificial surrogacy. His dramatization translates the rhetoric and the rite into explicitly politicized terms. These political aspects are especially pronounced in *The Souls of Black Folk*, because sacrificial designs are so variously present here. The same holds for *Billy Budd*, *Sailor* and *The Awkward Age*. My arguments about sacrifice will be elaborated through readings of these books in the context of other contemporary works. These texts will be understood as rich historical inscriptions of a rich historical world.

The task of reading historically brings me to questions of methodology, and it seems best to begin by clarifying how I understand the categories of social science, social theory, and sociology. I define social science as a general group of disciplines that developed over the course of two centuries (the eighteenth and nineteenth) and reached their critical emergent point at the turn of the twentieth century, when they were institutionalized in the United States as academic disciplines (among them, sociology, political science, economics, psychology, and anthropology) and codified in the works of major social scientific theorists particular to each field. I define social theory as thought about the nature of social processes. Social theory is concerned with identifying general concepts that can be widely applied to concrete situations. This is different from a philosophy of method whose principle concern is to distinguish the discipline in question from other emergent contemporary disciplines (e.g., Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method*, which aims, in part, to define "sociological facts" against "facts" as conceived by neighboring fields). In this formative period, however, there could be considerable overlap between theory and philosophy of method. We will also have occasion to discuss works that are qualitatively inferior to classic social theory. This is because modern social

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theory was not always written by major figures but sometimes by very minor ones, including those without any disciplinary credentials. There was then, as now, much popularizing of social scientific ideas, especially sociological ones, because of widespread interest in their potential for solving modern problems.

The guiding social scientific focus of this study is the field of sociology, which can be delimited by a few main characteristics. The first generation of sociologists saw human nature as fundamentally social and thus tended to focus on group behavior and forms of collective interaction. Their politics were defined by the necessity of reconceptualizing liberalism in the face of strong challenges from late-nineteenth-century socialist and conservative movements, and also by their growing recognition of cultural relativity. For the most part, sociologists were convinced that instrumental rationality held the potential for mediating change. They had an interest, therefore, in redirecting their methods from scientific metaphors (whether organic or mechanic) that underplayed human capacities for control to those affording some conception of human agency, especially through collective association. Finally, sociologists distinguished their discipline from other social sciences by its synthetic qualities. Sociology could draw upon and unify the diverse collection of social sciences undergoing institutionalization at this time.¹⁵ It will become apparent over the course of my analysis that these synthetic aims were highly successful. Sociology became a varied and complex discipline, capable of incorporating a great diversity of social and political interests.

Perhaps the most critical feature of the dialogue between literature and social science is the role of what I call the “border text.” The border text represents a crucial aspect of interdisciplinary discussions from the late nineteenth century through our own time. I see it as a work that at once defines and bridges divisions among professional disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, psychology), and, in turn, between these disciplines and more popular audiences. Marked by their accessible language and broad appeal, these texts cut across emerging specializations, in ways that accentuate the process of specialization itself. Consider a recent example of a border text: the latest social scientific sensation, *The Bell Curve*, an 845-page best-seller that “links low IQ to race and poverty.” Two aspects of the book are especially revealing from the perspective of my own study. First, one of the book’s authors, Charles Murray, is not, strictly speaking, trained professionally in the specialized areas the book takes up: psychology, biology, statistics. Second, the book ranges over numerous specializations in its effort to make a complex and controversial social issue accessible to a wide audience. Like Charles Murray himself, who is not identified with any particular profession but appears as a type of maverick amateur and policy whiz, the book is positioned clearly outside disciplinary boundaries. It ap-

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pears to me to be a direct descendant of the kinds of books that are so critical to the chapters that follow, such as Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* (1894), Nathaniel Shaler's *The Neighbor* (1904), and Frederick L. Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (1896).

I found that I was able to grasp dominant social issues most deeply in this textual margin between literature and sociology. The authors were sometimes fringe figures, neither sociologists nor anthropologists nor psychologists, who nonetheless wrote significant and influential works of social theory. They were often known by my literary authors. For example, Du Bois reviewed Hoffman, though few scholars read Hoffman today, in part because his ideas seem pernicious and easily dismissible. But border texts are popular precisely because they expose areas of cultural controversy and grievance. We ignore them at our peril, for what is especially striking from the start of the twentieth century to its end is the resurgence of Hoffman's or Shaler's theories on race in a book like *The Bell Curve*. Border texts testify to the engagement of major literary authors with contemporary social theory. They also reveal the outlines of a genuinely interdisciplinary region, one that might be regarded as a precursor to the postmodern literary critical field of cultural studies. Du Bois's *Souls*, which sold more copies than any of his other books, and was read by Max Weber as well as Henry James, is my study's central border text.

I understand the border text as a peculiarly modern phenomenon: it requires a culture with a developed publishing industry, where the concept of the best-seller is relatively commonplace. It also requires a culture in which the institutionalization of disciplines and fields of research is fairly well established. Finally, the border text is the product of a culture with some defined opposition between an intellectual elite, increasingly housed in universities, and popular audiences—the former imagined as the source of ideas, the latter as their (largely) passive receivers.¹⁶ I'm of course talking about the United States at the turn of the century. My definition of the border text presupposes a society in which there is a great deal of interest in the emerging fields of social science, generated by widespread perceptions of intensive social change. This includes unprecedented rates of economic growth, urbanization, and industrialization and unprecedented levels of labor unrest and immigration.

Interest in social science, especially in sociology, grew out of a generalized sense, partly cultivated by sociologists themselves, that the discipline represented a uniquely modern form of expertise. Sociology was a product of the changes it sought to mediate. The sociologist's aim, according to Albion Small, was to compensate for the "fragmentary knowledge" of "the millions" in a modern democracy.¹⁷ Small's view of the sociologist's synthetic purpose included a methodological imperative that I have already mentioned. But it was also democratic. Sociological methods were practi-

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cal: they could be used in mundane situations by ordinary people. Indeed, sociologists often saw themselves as providing scientific formulations of a socially common sense. Hence, the function of the border text: to translate sophisticated terminologies into a common language. Works such as *The Neighbor*, at the turn of the century, or *The Bell Curve*, more recently, claim to make general audiences feel more in control of the social changes that are controlling them.¹⁸ What these audiences are being controlled by most immediately are the ideological commitments of Nathaniel Shaler, Richard Herrnstein, and Charles Murray.

The rhetorical style of Edward Ross, who exhorted readers of his popular polemic *Sin and Society* (1907) “not [to] *Be good*, but [to] *Be rational*,” was typical of border texts.¹⁹ Introduced by the president of the United States (Theodore Roosevelt), who predicted “that its influence will be widespread,” the book’s title and subject suggest that it was intended to be both accessible and inflammatory. In keeping with Roosevelt’s prophecy, Ross reports in his autobiography that he received responses to the book from university presidents, bankers, and schoolteachers, as well as novelists, rabbis, and temperance reformers. Ross was himself a respected sociologist, whose first book, *Social Control* (1901), was described as “the brainiest piece of work that had come from our side of the water in a long time.”²⁰ I have suggested that the border text was a paradoxical achievement, in that it served at once to define and to defy disciplinary divisions. Its role in relation to popular audiences was similar: it both exaggerated and minimized the perceived distance between professional analysts and the larger public.

The idea of specific texts functioning as boundaries between different social groups and different areas of research raises a Frostian quandary. Historically speaking, what regions does the perspective of this study tend to wall in and wall out? My focus on sacrifice, especially as it is formulated in terms of a context where certain groups are consistently seen as victims, while others nearly always appear as beneficiaries of sacrificial rites, yields a rather depressing portrait of American society. I foreground this point in order to be as direct as possible about my aims and procedures. I will not be emphasizing the political gains made by women in this period, though they are implicit in everything I have to say about the modern crisis over women’s reproductive roles in chapter 3. Nor will I be highlighting the impressive achievements of working- and middle-class Blacks in the post-emancipation era. Nor (again) will I be dwelling upon the vigor and variety of American working-class culture at the end of the century. All of these developments have been amply described, and warrant further description.²¹ But the combination of literary authors and social scientists examined here and the kinds of questions—social, aesthetic, and political—that

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they collectively raise lead me to gloomier emphases. I find it difficult to read *Billy Budd, Sailor* or *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stein's *3-Lives* or Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, and emerge greatly encouraged about the state of the nation in their time. My study has been tempered by the works that it focuses on. I want to suggest, however, one way in which all of these works can be read as affording a view of human possibility alternative to their grim plots. It requires attributing to them a certain logic whereby these books generate, through their very grimness, the social alternatives that swarm around them. Though the overall perspective of these works is bleak, a properly dialectical approach needs to account for the developments that they imply, a borderland of imaginative redress and political agency. Du Bois, in his role as a public intellectual, might be taken as exemplary of this possibility. In addition to producing his vast scholarship, he was a journalist (editor of *The Crisis*) and activist (a founder of the NAACP, organizer of Pan-African Congresses, and spokesman for socialist causes). Such activities offset the disillusion and even despair that sometimes crept into his more substantive writings.

For the sake of clarity, let me rehearse a commonplace: however tangible in their own right, research areas are still constructions to a point, which is why it is important to be deliberate about the assumptions and methods that limit them. This is paramount for a study that proposes to shed some light on a particular moment in the history of sociology. The scientific ambitions of the field notwithstanding, questions about its roots have long been a source of controversy. Hard scientists may not feel responsible for their past, but social scientists seem convinced that there are significant stakes in the identification of a collective ancestry. Since the debate over the origins of sociology is not my central concern, I will confine myself to a select group of sociologists who have provided analyses of their professional history. From my perspective, what seems especially noteworthy is how little mention there is, in most cases, of an American sociological past, as if the writings of Small, Giddings, Ross, and others represented a professional nightmare, best left to the discretion of historians. The earliest self-proclaimed attempts to recover a sociological tradition by sociologists themselves came in the 1920s. After Albion Small's 1924 *Origins*, the significant contributions include the '40s histories of Harry Elmer Barnes, Floyd House, and the Bernards, as well as studies from the '60s and '70s by Robert Nisbet, Irving Zeitlin, and the Schwendingers. More recent analyses, by Anthony Giddens, Stefan Collini, and Jeffrey Alexander, display both theoretical sophistication and an awareness of how difficult it is to establish the borders between a "modern" field like sociology and a long prehistory of thought about society, between sociology and other contemporary social sciences, and between scientific

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investigation and the work of more marginal figures, where sociological ideas may exist in inchoate form.²² Alert to the political investments couched in predominant clichés about the past, these authors try to understand how current disciplinary controversies shape myths about sociology's origins.

Professional development in these arguments is fluid, inadvertent, and wide-ranging, which is consistent with my sense of how border texts function: to pinpoint a more varied dispersal of classic sociological theories (from the likes of Durkheim, Weber, Giddings, Ross) than has been recognized. I read their work as part of an extended social scientific debate in which they were often joined by amateurs, and also in terms of contemporary aesthetic debates and forms of novelistic representation. My assumption here is that there was a common context of thought about the origins of society. One of its features was its international constituency. Most of the sociologists who played a prominent role in formulating the new discipline were educated abroad (usually in Germany, but occasionally in France or in Britain). Since the discipline was seen as a product of the modern interdependence it sought to analyze, it was inevitable that sociology would be conceived as a worldwide (more exactly, a European and Anglo-American) enterprise. No one working in this emergent field could afford to be provincial. So, for example, Franklin Giddings reviewed Karl Pearson's *Chances of Death and Other Studies* (1897) for the *American Journal of Sociology* as soon as it appeared; Americans read Durkheim before the turn of the century, and the British Sociological Association organized a special forum on his work in the same period; Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution*, a border text published in Britain, greatly influenced the first British as well as American sociologists; Albion Small translated and published Simmel (in the *AJS*) in the 1890s; Weber corresponded with Du Bois, consulting him for a reading list on the race question; and Durkheim drew upon British and American ethnography for his theories about religion. The eagerness on the part of the first generation of sociologists to keep abreast of professional developments in other countries matched their openness to the work of nonprofessionals. In this early moment of professional self-definition, boundaries of all kinds tended to be strict in theory (due to sensitivity about the novelty of these fields) but loose in practice.

The literature on sacrifice is marked by an international lexicon through which national peculiarities are discernible. I have mentioned the reliance of the Durkheimian *Année* scholars on the research of British and American ethnographers. This was especially true of their specific ideas about sacrifice, which were based in the theories of British Bible specialists. Sacrificial rites and themes, as presented in social scientific works of this period, tended to be part of a grand international continuum of writings

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about sacredness and secularity. They captured a prevailing sense of modern society's extensive interdependencies, of the elaborate checks and balances that, in the view of many, defined not only economics but social life in general. They also expressed a sense of distance from a powerfully imagined spiritual tradition. Most of these sociologists came from middle-class backgrounds, and their politics ranged from mild forms of liberalism to conservatism. They were prepared to accept the idea that social apportionments (of opportunity and wealth) would be variable. For the most part, they considered it inevitable that some groups in society would prosper while others suffered—that some law of social equilibrium demanded this.

It is well known that America at the turn of the century was remarkable for its spectacles of economic imbalance. The proximity of rich and poor in the close atmospheres of New York or Chicago, the discrepancy between debilitating poverty and lavish wealth, became the staple of a national success myth, shaped in part by the novels of Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser's narrators are famous for their rapt contemplation of capitalism's four humors—will, character, luck, and training—which makes some stars, others beggars. Max Weber was aware of the unique laboratory afforded by this modernizing urban landscape. He found much to ponder as well in the rural Ohio and North Carolina communities where he visited his German immigrant relatives during his 1904 trip. Despite his admiration for American habits of voluntarism, which he felt politicized its citizens far more effectively than the authoritarian institutional structures of his native Germany, Weber noted a vast array of social problems in this “model of a new society.”²³ Labor troubles, “the terrible immigration,” “the Negro question” together formed a “big, black cloud” on the American horizon (16).

Weber's view was widely shared by fellow sociologists, who used the United States as a consistent point of reference. There was nothing new in this: Marx and Engels, among others, recognized America as the ultimate modern-capitalist case. The questions that preoccupied sociologists and guided their theoretical speculations were felt to have direct and immediate expression here. The same holds true for the significance of sacrifice in particular. The American context was unusually susceptible to sacrificial rhetoric and acts, for reasons I have highlighted above: prevailing convictions of its vastly discrepant levels of opportunity and wealth, and the incomparable extent of its social heterogeneity.

My literary examples have a similar international scope. All of the writers with whom I am concerned studied in Europe or on the Continent (James, Norris, Crane, Du Bois) or traveled extensively there (Melville). Some became permanent exiles (James, Stein, Du Bois). This cosmopolitanism is reflected in the settings of my primary works. *Billy Budd* comes

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into focus somewhere between late-eighteenth-century Europe and late-nineteenth-century America; *The Awkward Age* is concerned with the decay of a British leisure class; and *The Souls of Black Folk* seems more appropriately addressed to the world at large than to Du Bois's benighted American neighbors. Each of these texts, which provide the focus in turn of chapters 2, 3, and 4, opens out into an extraordinary range of methods and issues. The first is typological. *Billy Budd* is preoccupied with the task of "cataloging the creatures of the deep." The novella's cryptic narrator takes an analytical, one might even say "interdisciplinary" (anthropological, biblical, aesthetic, sociological), approach to the problem of social heterogeneity in different modern cultures. James's titular category, "the Awkward Age," anticipates Weberian ideal types. It seeks to capture the process of historical change through the identification of a normative figure equally applicable to individual and social conditions (adolescence as well as societies in transition). Both James and Weber can be seen as sustaining Tonnies's typological framework of modern change (*Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*), though Weber would have rejected this conceptual strait-jacket, and James would probably not have known it. Du Bois recognized as profoundly as Melville and James the perils of rational typologies. This explains his transition, in the space of three years, from the sociological types of *Philadelphia Negro* to the provisional literary types of *Souls*.

The connections between my literary and social scientific subjects goes beyond the mere use of types. All of the authors in my study were absorbed with the problem of social control. Vigilance is a privileged sense in these works, an ideal condition of attention and concern. It involves the erection and maintenance of boundaries, both conceptual (as in a penchant for disciplines and types) and actual (as in a constant awareness of threats to social borders and dramatizations of disorder or its possibility). The privileging of vigilance expresses the view of society as a worldwide web of interrelations that can only be experienced through sharp apprehensions of immediate effects (the shortage of rain for Russia's wheat crop inflating the price of American breakfast cereal). Such ideas served to alleviate social responsibility for acts and events whose causes were readily apparent. Vigilance—intensification of sight coupled with anxiety about what eluded detection—had more to do with horrors that were known and controllable than with those that were not. This complex and ambivalent formulation of social consciousness and agency is basic to the dramatic action of my principal literary examples. *Billy Budd* begins in spectacle: all eyes fixed in fascination upon the figure of a Handsome Sailor, whose ultimate echo is the handcuffed Billy Budd, hung from the ship's yardarm. *The Awkward Age* begins with the sighting of a four-wheeler, which inspires the usual Jamesian flurry of interpretation: Who is it for? Whose social form does it represent? This sighting foreshadows a later image of another (this time,

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speculative) “post-chaise,” which the novel’s elderly “priest” may use to shepherd the sacrificial lamb into exile. *The Souls of Black Folk* begins with a paradigmatic (mis)apprehension of Blacks by Whites. The invariable White failure to penetrate the “mystery” of Blackness is resolved in the funeral procession of chapter 11, where Black identity is conflated with the final “mystery” of death.

From the sailor’s dogwatch of Melville’s sea story to the vigilante lynching committees that hover sinisterly at the margins of Du Bois’s Black Belt, an emphasis on vigilance reveals how apprehensions of certain human bodies have changed. *Billy Budd* confronts changes in the administration of working-class male bodies in a modern social order. Here, natural and barbaric constraints give way to the tempered legalism of formal “executions.” *The Awkward Age* devotes much attention to the reproductive capacities of White female adolescents. The female adolescent becomes the hope of the middle and upper classes and a metaphor for all forms of production, from the modern nation’s capacity for self-regeneration to literary creation itself. *The Souls of Black Folk* at once confirms and challenges constructions of the Black body as a site of decay. Typological method achieves its fullest realization in these different attentions to the fate of the human body. These books help us to see the paradoxical function of types, as means for both forgetting and remembering bodies. Types help us to remember by identifying the body as determinate: the Philadelphia Negro can be none other than this. They help us to forget by eliminating the idea of privacy: the body as physically known to one, despite its mediateness, is evacuated.

The subjects of vigilance and corporeality extend to another concern shared by all of the writers in my study: the problem of demographics. Again this can be grasped through the details of exemplary literary texts. Melville worries about the numbers of immigrants entering the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, a human sea vividly apparent to him through his role as Customs House inspector for the Port of New York until 1885, the year he began writing *Billy Budd*. James imagines the turn-of-the-century society of his bourgeois and aristocratic characters as perfectly sterile. Dispossessed of its reproductive capacities, and of its capacity to transfer its values and customs to succeeding generations, it is helpless before the collective demographic power of social “inferiors” at home and abroad—Jews, the poor, primitive populations. Du Bois’s early writings are immersed in demographic debates on the survival capacities of Blacks in the twentieth century. Here again, Du Bois provides the most pronounced case of an interest common to all three writers. This is partly because his marginal social position motivated an especially profound questioning of widely recognized “problems” and “solutions.” It is also a consequence of his self-imposed marginality vis-à-vis literary and social

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scientific practice. In the chapters that follow, I show how the demographic preoccupations of each work are elaborated through the reformulation of a universal category: *Billy Budd*, the category of Origins; *The Awkward Age*, the category of Reproduction; and *Souls*, the category of Death. The question addressed to Billy Budd early on, “Do you know anything about your beginning?” (437), circulates aboard the *Bellipotent* like a contagion. No member of this “motley” ship’s crew, nor any event that befalls it, escapes the taint of ambiguous cause. This seems appropriate given the novella’s larger purpose: to replace a worn-out myth of biblical origins with an alienating myth of social scientific origins. Reproduction in *The Awkward Age* is radically contextualized. Far from a mysterious feminine faculty independent of human control, it is recognized as a politically live attribute, too valuable to be overlooked by dominant social powers. *Souls* exposes turn-of-the-century efforts to refashion death in blackface, as a means of sublimation and displacement. In each instance, a universal is recognized in resolutely particular terms.

These works serve as various confirmations of the modern insight that universals are apprehensible only through the associations they take on in specific contexts. These particularities are not unlimited. The universal category of sexual reproduction, for example, is associated with women; the category of death, with degraded or subordinate groups. These universals in turn afford a limited range of social action in each chapter. Melville’s interest in origins results in a narrative about the transformation of social order, now seen as an invention sustained by identifiable authorities. The work’s threatening subplot views workers as compliant, even romantic individually, but menacing collectively. James’s interest in reproduction generates a plot about the transformation of social welfare; formerly centered in maternity, it is now seen as the province of the liberal state. The novel’s subplot portrays the female adolescent as a figure for women in transition, challenging traditional roles, and resisting accommodations essential to the status quo. Du Bois’s interest in death leads to a plot about the transformation of sympathy from a universal sentiment to one whose effects are exclusive and even disingenuous (to the extent that it retains the mythology of its former inclusiveness). Du Bois’s subplot is the double threat posed by a Black collectivity: whether through its imperceptible penetration of society (intermarriage, “passing”) or as an isolated mass, threatening to Whites. Finally, each example confronts a central theoretical issue as historical event: in Melville, the making of a modern working class; in James, the gender basis of the welfare state; in Du Bois, the racial subtext of the sociology of sympathy.

In both fiction and works of sociology, vigilance is the privileged sense, and sacrifice is the privileged act. Sacrifice is necessary to the maintenance of social order, the achievement of a certain level of culture, and the per-

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petuation of a certain kind of economy. Sacrifice, according to these authors, is not only necessary to modern Western society, it is basic; it makes society what it is. Thus, Durkheim's primitives in *Elementary Forms* reach the height of collective intensity through mourning rites that include sacrificial forms of self-mutilation and revenge. The famous postulate derived from these rites—"men do not weep for the dead because they fear them; they fear them because they weep for them"—provides an accurate summary of sacrificial transactions. The social is defined by what is *given up* in order to reproduce it. None of the thinkers in my study was more aware of these definitions than Melville, James, and Du Bois. Du Bois's portrait of sacrifice is the most vivid and categorical. He describes how he has relinquished his own son (in a gesture as literal as Abraham's surrender of Isaac) and reads his own sacrifice in the context of the sacrifices made by a Black collectivity as a matter of routine. James takes a moral approach to the rite of sacrifice, by dramatizing how the civilized satisfactions of a degenerate modern circle are earned at the expense of its female adolescents. The ideal form of social welfare—the maternal high ground represented in the novel as the Moon or the Marble Arch—is sacrificed on behalf of a collective appetite for sexual liberty and pulp fiction. Melville's writings adhere most faithfully to the religious pathway that is the source of all this literary and social scientific interest in sacrifice. Measuring at every turn how far modern man has fallen from the altars of ancient belief, they also reveal him as all the more caught up in its wrought frame. Melville's historical kaleidoscope in the opening pages of *Billy Budd*, which takes us from the Black sailor to the Assyrian Bull to the modern worker, is designed to convey the durability of sacrificial devotions. This is consistent with another formal continuity confirmed by Melville's text: that sacrifice has been an inducement to narrative from ancient times to modern.²⁴

Billy Budd confirms not only a formal but an historical continuity: the dominance of sacrifice as a social practice. For if there is a single message in my book, it is the relevance of sacrifice as social thought and social action, supporting the most entrenched as well as innovative institutions (from charity to life insurance) and mediating the most complex developments (from the "invention" of homosexuality to the rise of racial segregation). Chapter 1 analyzes social scientific narratives of sacrifice, as parts of standard works and as the focus of more esoteric studies; it concludes with an exploration of selected literary texts that helped me to recover this cultural mythology. Chapter 2 examines Melville's treatment of sacrifice. *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, *Clarel*, and *Billy Budd* (the chapter's literary center) guide this inquiry into the subject of origins—biblical versus secular—and corresponding questions of heterogeneity and social control. Chapter 3 explores turn-of-the-century preoccupations with the scapegoat mechanism—sacrifice in one of its most prominent ancient forms. James's *The Awkward Age*

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provides a cultural lens, exposing a range of mythic, social scientific, and theological perspectives on sacrificial powers of purification. Chapter 4 describes Du Bois's early writings as powerful commentaries—at once social scientific and aesthetic—on a set of dilemmas that resonate with peculiar force in our own time: the decline of humanitarian sentiments, the rationalization of death rites, the relationship between Black elite and Black masses. I end with Du Bois because more than any other works addressed in this study, his early writings testify to the salutary and even redemptive possibilities afforded by the intellectual embrace of sacrifice.