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The U.S.–Mexican War in James Russell Lowell’s *The Biglow Papers*

ONE READING OF THE U.S.–MEXICAN WAR leads to a sobering conclusion: the United States of America is an ordinary country in an ordinary place, given to ordinary national ambitions, and typically violent expansionist methods. With few exceptions, most American historians of the war avoid this interpretation, preferring instead to chart the politics that led up to the conflict, the progress of battles, or the internal tensions that followed it. Rarely do they delve into its particular and massive contradictions, an elision attesting to the persistent narrative power of American exceptionalism. In the 1840s, that political mythology framed a dubious war against a sovereign country as an act of self-defense, justified by moral obligations, and grounded in America’s putative role as a light of freedom. Many Americans of the era, infused with a surging nationalism, saw the conflict’s necessity and justice as self-evident. Jingoistic war supporters like Walt Whitman unquestioningly declared Mexico’s European anachronism to be by definition opposed to America’s globally redemptive purpose.

But even before it began, contemporary politicians and writers were debating the war’s morality and justice. Dubious at best, at worst a spectacularly unprovoked aggression, the war, fought from 1846 to 1848, required an imaginative re-arrangement into the framework of exceptionalist belief because it could so obviously demonstrate that America’s national mythology could also be a veneer for greed and violence—perhaps not the redeeming enterprise of a republic dedicated to the advancement of democracy and freedom. Predictably, many writers

wrote single-minded and jingoistic screeds, enthusiastic conflation of history and destiny which saturated a great deal of the era's nationalist poetry, war fiction, and patriotic music. Intriguingly, the mythology so exuberantly produced quickly faded into historical obscurity. Unlike the Alamo battle of 1836, retold ad nauseam, Americans largely have boxed away the U.S.–Mexican War's exceptionalist narrative in the national attic. The reasons for this are complex, but they are rooted in the way Mexico and Mexicans as national military antagonists foreground the historical and mundane origins of American mythic identity and thus redefine it as a denial of reality, a fabrication intended in part to obscure the often murderous actions of Europeans set loose in North America. When historians and others do investigate the war's more worldly causes and effects, they find themselves delving into an America at odds with prevailing notions of national supremacy, an America of limitations and mutabilities. This is not to deny the power and efficacy of national myths, only to note that American ideals are enmeshed in quotidian realities, continually evolving into new forms.

Such complexity rarely finds itself in the histories, but it energizes much of the U.S.–Mexican War's imaginative literature, which often grappled with national mutability, ideological contradiction, and cultural anxiety. Fervent nationalist poets, musical composers, dramatists, writers of pulp fiction, politicians and preachers all expressed optimistic variations of American triumphalism, but many others darkened their work with shadowing doubts and uncertainties. The war against Mexico generated not just the stabilizing narratives of racial or national dichotomies—not just monochromatic, racist American ethno-nationalism—but also intense counter-narratives wherein Mexico and Mexicans were either equivalent Americans defending their republic from invasion, or, in a further extension, and far more disturbing, agents of existential disturbance, standing against the very possibility of meaning itself. One of the clearest examples of this kind of agonistic U.S.–Mexican War literature is *The Biglow Papers* of 1848, an anti-war satire by James Russell Lowell who, as a respected poet and literary critic, occupied a leading position among nineteenth-century Boston literati. *The Biglow Papers* are complicated and complicating, shaped as they are by a military collision that exposed American ideals not just as veils for hypocrisy, but also as evidence of mass delusion. At its core, Lowell's satire meditates somberly on national unease, a text situated perilously between Amer-

ica and non-America. Moreover, its concerns about Mexico reach into the present moment because, seen from a particular point of view, the work sheds light on why Mexicans and Mexican Americans continue to trigger American national anxieties. Little altered since the 1840s, the terms of Mexico, Mexican, and now Mexican American remain a source of tension for those who see the United States as a special Anglo-Saxon culture. For them, American identity is not only a powerful narrative, but also, and always, self-evident reality.

Instead of assumed, unquestioned mythology, Lowell's U.S.–Mexican War satire stages a play of beliefs and doubts. He deploys a range of responses that negates singularity, a proto-post-modernism that this paper juxtaposes with the U.S.–Mexican War and the continuing presence of Mexico in the American imagination. At one pole, Lowell sings a familiar Anglo-Saxonist ethno-nationalism, but then also presents a suspicious self-criticality, and finally displays a richly articulated, feverishly self-aware angst that questions the validity of nations, language, knowledge, and truth itself. In a sense, Lowell takes the anxious light of the U.S.–Mexican War and refracts it through a dialogical prism, the resulting spectral lines demarcating Mexico as antithetical to the American nation, as equivalent to it, and as a disillusioning national agent. Such a somber three-part analysis suggests that Lowell saw that the ideal America was dialectically evoked by a confrontation with a destabilizing event—but also that he understood how American identity has been implicated in exclusion and violence against others. But the Mexican enemy raised the stakes even more. Mexican military antagonists forced Americans into an international arena that blurred the distinction between America's sacred space and the mundane affairs of the world. Mexicans were at once supremely antithetical, and therefore evil, but also entirely familiar as another American people with utopian dreams. Today, many in the United States continue to define the expanding Mexican presence as a threat to America's existence, and not, chiefly, as figures of evil or barbarism. To grasp that distinction is to understand how American exceptionalists locate Mexicans and Mexican Americans in their narratives of identity.

One of the curious aspects about *The Biglow Papers* in American studies is that scholars have done so little to place it within the context of the very war that inspired it. In *Constituting Americans* Priscilla Wald explores how self-definition and anxiety are linked in nationalizing nar-

ratives. But she omits any sustained reference to the way Mexico and Mexican Americans generate precisely such anxieties about national identity, nor does she focus specifically on the U.S–Mexican War, nor on Lowell’s text, all of which can be immediately and usefully approached through questions of national disturbance.

Recent work in the literature of the U.S–Mexican War by Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations*, and an earlier study by Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, have argued for the conflict’s formative significance. Social constructions of race, class, and labor are key to Streeby’s analysis; Johannsen explores the romantic nationalism running through the array of U.S–Mexican War writings, art, and other discourse. Yet, both Streeby and Johannsen contain the war’s effects primarily in the nineteenth century. When they turn to Lowell they view him as an interesting, but conflicted and confused writer wrestling unsuccessfully with the contradictions of a specific moment in history. Even Gavin Jones’s recent study of dialect literature, *Strange Talk* which highlights the political implications of Lowell’s satire and its foundational importance for subsequent vernacular writings, does not delve into the U.S–Mexican War context or the interplay of language registers in *The Biglow Papers*.

My approach attends to an array of literary cross-fertilizations running through Lowell’s text and incorporates the rhetoric of American singularity as it relates to the specific presence of Mexico. Ultimately, I am concerned with the continuing meaning of Mexicans in America. I begin by noting that the move into Mexican territory and the confrontation with Mexicans intensifies (though does not trigger) American exceptionalism. Anglo-Saxon supremacism is not the same as American liberal ideology, but anti-Mexican rhetoric during and after the war tends to erase that distinction so that to be Anglo-Saxon means to believe in democracy, civil rights, and economic self-determination against a Mexican presence defined as fatally anachronistic. Thus, in this study, American exceptionalism means, basically, a particular mode of belief among people in the nineteenth century who identify themselves as Anglo-Saxons, although other groups regardless of race, ethnicity, or class (including Mexican Americans) can appropriate the power of American mythology. Today, Anglo-Saxonist American exceptionalism once again deploys against a vigorous Mexican migration into the United States, a demographic trend now occurring within

a global arena of a war against terrorism. The cultural purists easily conflate “border” and “national” security, and the mythological historicizing of Samuel Huntington, among others, captures the way Mexican Americans are seen by some as avatars of international threats. The still important narratological architecture of American nationalism—a target of fascination, envy, love and hatred—makes Lowell’s *Biglow Papers* relevant today. Lowell’s text explicitly brings under scrutiny the enabling fictions of “America” and “American.”

Although the charged exchange between national formation, expansionism, and social disturbance that runs through *The Biglow Papers* is not the focus of most U.S.–Mexican War histories, it does ground more specific analyses of United States expansionism. For example, Thomas Hietala in *Manifest Design* also reads expansionism through the terms of fear, anxiety, and unpredictable change. I am indebted also to Reginald Horsman’s *Race and Manifest Destiny*, which investigates the way conflict with Mexico catalyzed notions of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. The questions of race, however, do not completely explain the fears about Mexicans. Border violence certainly was and continues to be racialized—race is a fiction, and therefore too often sharply real—but my analysis sees Mexican and Mexican Americans primarily in an extra-national guise challenging not notions of pure “whiteness” but of pure “American-ness.” It bears noting that, though never devoid of their own fissures and contradictions, the strongly racializing narratives of Alamo mythology and Mexican banditry remain far more stable, consistent, and enduring than the more self-conscious productions regarding the U.S.–Mexican War.

The national hostilities, which began in the scrubland near present-day Brownsville in 1846 and ended in the streets of Mexico City a little over a year later, were of a different order and led to more conflicted texts. While these writings could be infused with virulent racism and ethno-nationalism, they could be also revelatory of globalizing disturbances that make apparent a universe of uncertainty and change. Thus my analysis relies significantly on a Bakhtinian approach that attends to the way texts, novels in particular, can be viewed as demonstrations of the dialogisms, the complexities and fissures resisted and denied by the centripetal energies of nationalism, racism, myth, and other boundary-making beliefs. Lowell’s *Biglow Papers* are chaotically poly-vocal, digressive, parodic, and carnivalesque. In fact, the work can

be understood as a Bakhtinian novel because it is saturated with the dis-cohering energy that Bakhtin ascribed to that genre. I do not make a case for Bakhtinian multiplicity to celebrate democratic pluralism; I propose it as an hermeneutic emphasizing the disruptive agency of United States-Mexico contact and conflict. The U.S–Mexican War’s literary significance lies not in how it shapes dominant Anglo views toward Mexicans (it did not do so), nor in how it establishes “images” or “stereotypes” of Mexicans (already in circulation before the war), but, rather on how aspects of the conflict work against just such definitions and coherent narratives.¹

The Biglow Papers needs to be more properly introduced, because, like many other U.S–Mexican War texts today, the work is generally unknown or unread. Published in book form in 1848, *The Biglow Papers* is a collection of verse and prose satires criticizing both the war and slavery.² It is recognized as one of the better works from an author who wanted his writing to participate in American national definition. As a prominent Boston figure with designs on literary fame, Lowell was a moralist who believed in the possibility of linking literature with social reform (Duberman 60–66). When he decided to write about the war, he became part of an unabashedly political literary reaction from writers who saw it as an opportunity, a mandate even, to outline and promote national and cultural values. Literary imaginations were fired by the war’s pervasiveness. Journalists and soldiers documented the invasion of Mexico for readers back home in what turned out to be the United States’ first media war. Spanish words entered the American English lexicon; Mexican battlefields and city names found their way back to the States; and the public hungered for news and stories about the country’s first expressly international military campaign. The deluge of information and entertainment coincided with “an age of poetry” in which Americans were experimenting with literary expression (Johansen 205–6). Most pro-war literature was numbingly predictable. It lauded the war, celebrated U.S. soldiers and volunteers, and romanticized America in terms that most Americans today would likely find uncomfortably naive. Sheppard M. Ashe’s 1852 *Monterey Conquered* is one example of a sentimentalizing battle story, as is the war poetry of the more famous William Gilmore Simms, whose war offerings include *Lays of the Palmetto* (1848).

Other writers, however, countered the militaristic romances with writings critiquing slavery and indicting the invasion as a stratagem to extend the South's slave-holding power (Johanssen 214). It was from this abolitionist perspective that Lowell penned a series of infrequent satiric dialect verses beginning shortly after hostilities broke out along Mexico's Rio Bravo (now the Rio Grande). Late in 1848, *The Biglow Papers* appeared as a collection of six poems in Yankee dialect by the fictional Hosea Biglow, a farmer writing in opposition to the war, but expressing a sharp Anglo-Saxon isolationism. With Biglow's poems, Lowell included three "letters" by a fictional Yankee U.S.–Mexican War volunteer, Birdofredum Sawin, letters rewritten into dialect poetry by the fictional Biglow. Sawin's contributions, harsh and ironic, dramatize how the war could unsettle belief in Anglo-Saxonist cant. Lowell had published these verses in newspapers before, but in the monograph they were framed by prose commentaries by an equally imaginary Parson Homer Wilbur, a country parson whose pompous pedantic English articulates the most de-centering energies of the war, writing, as did others, in disillusionment's minor keys.

Fragmentary and diverse, the various pieces range from anti-war critiques, to tongue-in-cheek pro-war rants by immoral politicians, to agonistic essays about language and knowledge. All of this is complicated further by a series of narrative frames within frames: Lowell invents Wilbur who edits the poetry of the equally fictional Biglow, but the titular Yankee farmer's role in the text is not only to write poetry, but to also rewrite Sawin's frontline letters into dialect verse.³ To best appreciate the stakes of Lowell's linguistic play, we must attend first to Biglow, himself, and to the politics of plain-talk.

YANKEE-TALK AND U.S. AMERICAN IDEALS

The titular Hosea Biglow opposes the U.S.–Mexican War, but not because he empathizes with Mexico or its inhabitants. Rather he looks inward, speaking and writing in a Yankee dialect that circulated as the linguistic component of a larger cultural elevation of American Anglo-Saxon identity (Horsman 208–28). The linguistic ethnocentrism is closely linked to programs of exclusion and bears a moment's consideration apart from Biglow's politics. At mid-century, Yankee slang reinforced cultural essentialism because it was routinely associated with Anglo-Saxon ethnicity, a way of talking that marked an essential Eng-

lishness. Although in some cases Anglo-Saxon language courses were taught in schools, Anglo-Saxon authenticity figured as the inheritance of the untutored common people, the “bold, free, and rude song of the bard which tallies strong nature” (Bernbrock 71). Behind such visions of undefiled Englishness lay a utopian argument, a way of seeing Anglo-Saxon identity as set apart from the normal world and aligned with eternal Nature. As Jones has explained, Lowell’s use of dialect “was part of a wider movement to keep culture ‘pure’ by identifying non-English elements as foreign to the American essence” (42). The good farmer Biglow may seem culturally tolerant, but he actually gives voice to a mode of cultural supremacy not too different, if at all, from John L. O’Sullivan’s more infamously blatant vision of an expanding manifestation of racial destiny. To talk in country slang draws a firm ethnonationalist boundary.

Lowell’s use of Yankee dialect, or, more precisely, his construction of it, similarly interacts with a belief in an Anglo-American pastoral essence.⁴ This rural domain, close to Nature and uncorrupted by the world, has strong associations in the text with the slangy vocabulary of authentic Englishness. To be clear, by pastoral I mean the conventional notion of a work of literature that idealizes an agrarian or rustic region against the fallen worlds of cities and civilization. In Jacksonian America, the pastoral ideal coincided with the rise of an American populism that increasingly valorized the rhetoric of an ideal, democratic, common man, and even elite conservatives voiced disingenuous expressions of solidarity with the plain folk (Simpson 146).⁵ Anglo-Saxonism at mid-century centered on notions of simplicity, authenticity, and independence, and American pastoralism to which Anglo-Saxonism corresponded confirmed the belief in a special, incorruptible perfect nation. The mythic strains of Anglo-Saxon, as David Simpson has written, were “part of the vitalist energy of the democratic American language” (251). These three social currents—an undefiled authentic language, a pastoral utopianism and the democratic elevation of the ordinary “Anglo-Saxon”—were by the 1830s and 1840s intertwined strands of Anglo-American identity. This is why Biglow’s rustic speech in its very assumptions already acts as a boundary-making language and not easily given over to sympathy with others, especially others like Mexicans.

White ethnicity, social coherence, moral purity, these are the rising harmonic overtones in Biglow’s New England drawl. But Lowell’s pre-

sentation of Yankee dialect is so perfectly idealized that it may seem flippantly parodic. It is, in fact, Parson Wilbur who opens the book with a preface to Biglow's first poem, laying out the basic theory: "Yet, after all, thin, speculative Jonathan is more like the Englishman of two centuries ago than John Bull himself is He has lost somewhat in solidity, has become fluent and adaptable, but more of the original groundwork of character remains" (40). Echoing Emerson and Whitman and other writers searching for a key to the American character, Wilbur adds that people who know dialect as spoken in Massachusetts "will not fail to recognize, in ordinary discourse, many words now noted in English vocabularies as archaic, the greater part of which were in common use about the time of the King James translation of the Bible. Shakespeare stands less in need of a glossary to most New Englanders than to many a native of the Old Country" (41).⁶

The obvious objection is that this is the fictional Wilbur, and not Lowell, writing/narrating. Is Lowell invoking these beliefs, or is he lampooning them? If Wilbur is a focal point for national doubt, why is he here promulgating the cant of Anglo-Saxonist identity? I address this question below, but it is worth noting that Lowell himself was conflicted about these views, aware of the illusionary within the projects of national authenticity. For example, on the one hand, in an 1867 essay reviewing his own extensive knowledge of English usage in the United States, Lowell offers an extended and tedious examination of "Yankee dialect" (Introduction), and he echoes his pedantic parson through his own elaborate, and apparently sincere, discussion of a Yankee idiom linked directly to the "Anglo-Saxon" language (Bernbrock 82–83). On the other hand, just one year later, he was ambivalent about, and even critical of, just this sort of essentialist mythology, warning against attributing "special virtues" to a language (83). As Johanssen and others have noted, Lowell could echo conventional destinarian dogma (Johanssen 218), or criticize its delusions.

Lowell may have been undecided about canting rhetoric, but his good Yankee Biglow adheres to basic exceptionalist premises without hesitation. His New English drawl puts forward a fundamental distinction between an immutable Yankee voice of truth on the one hand (not unlike Natty Bumppo's, generally critical of social failings), and, on the other, the speechifying of politicians, registered as deceptive, hypocritical and self-delusional.⁷ Thus, Biglow's first poem rings with confidence,

immune from worldly deceptions and suffused with American democratic ideals. The war, he says, is a ruse by southern slave-owners to expand their power: “Massachusetts, God forgive her, / She’s akneelin’ with the rest, / She, thet ough’ to ha’ clung fer ever / In her grand old eagle-nest; / She thet ough’ to stand so fearless / Wile the wracks are round her hurled, / Holdin’ up a beacon peerless / To the oppressed of the world!” Biglow goes on to allude to the Revolutionary moment: “Haint they sold your colored seamen? / Haint they made your env’y’s wiz? / Wut’ll make ye act freemen? / Wut’ll git your dander riz? / Come, I’ll tell you wut I’m thinkin’ / Is our dooty in this fix, / They ’d ha’ done ’t ez quick ez winkin’ / In the days o’ seventy-six” (53–54).

Instinctively wise, untutored, untainted by worldly corruptions, Biglow’s plain-talk parallels the clarity of his moral compass. He establishes his ethical position in this opening poem, reminding readers that “America” stands for liberty and democracy. The nation is mandated to guide the rest of the world into a future of freedom, but the slave-owning South is leading the nation astray. Acting as a truth-telling Yankee Jeremiah, Biglow aligns proper national action with high moral principles, excoriating the country for failing to follow the precepts of Christianity and foundational American ideals: “They may talk o’Freedom’s airy / Tell they’re pupple in the face, — / It’s a grand gret cemetery / Fer the barthrights of our race; / They jest want this Californy / So’s to lug new slave-states in / To abuse ye, an’to scorn ye, / An’ to plunder ye like sin” (51–52).

I have concentrated on these lines of Biglow’s, all of which come from the first main entry in *The Biglow Papers*, primarily because that first poem is the only one Lowell offers as directly expressing Biglow’s own opinions. Wherever there is Yankee dialect in the rest of the text, it is mostly Biglow satirically voicing the thoughts of others for purposes of ridicule, or rewriting the letters of Sawin into verse. If one adheres to the fictional conceits of *The Biglow Papers*, these first stanzas offer Biglow’s most direct views on the war. Significantly, this opening poem ends its argument with an isolationist solution: “Ef I’d my way I hed ruther / We should go to work an’part, / They [the slave states] take one way, we take t’other” (54).

The dream at all costs, even if it means splitting the union. In his critical edition of the text, Wortham explains that Lowell likely did not hold such secessionist views, though they were not uncommon in other

quarters (190 n). Still, the isolationism suggests how religious ideals and self-righteous proclamations of national destiny could easily align within anti-war rhetoric. Because "America" is a special place unlike any other, the war against Mexico practically becomes sacrilegious. Biglow's argument advances the utopianism implied in his dialect because both are premised on the possibility, or the established fact in the eyes of believers, of social perfection. The war and slavery are wrong because they violate the ideals of a special nation, they infringe on sacred "bar-thrights" and they stain that "beacon peerless" that U.S. Americans should be holding up to the world just as they did in the "days o' seventy-six." That the war is unjust to Mexico—harms Mexico, leads to the unwarranted deaths of Mexicans—does not matter in this critique.

Actually, anti-war protests of this sort typically stemmed from an anxiety about American cultural purity. Horsman notes that Whig dissent often worried about potential racial contamination following the inclusion of Mexicans into the United States. Their concern, he writes, was with "what aggression was doing to the United States, not what aggression was doing to Mexico" (240). The Biglow portions of *The Biglow Papers* echo just this cultural discomfort; no historical context here outlines previous troubles in Texas and almost nothing in Biglow's voice can be said to express a Mexican case against the invasion. Like anti-war Whigs, the titular Biglow spends most of his time critiquing the different evils of slavery and deceitful politicians. Even as he castigates warmongers in the opening poem, he derisively dismisses Mexicans as "poor half-Spanish drones" (53).

The affinity between Biglow's isolationism and the expansionism crystallized by O'Sullivan can be made even clearer through a contrast with other anti-war writing (a distinction Lowell actually makes himself, but not through Biglow). Lowell might have written a dialect poem in Biglow's voice that openly critiqued the violence of specific battles in Mexico directly, traced the historical events that led up to it, or elevated Mexicans as worthy opponents—all aspects of other war protests in the 1840s. For example, one of Theodore Parker's anti-war sermons, although marked by his own anti-Mexican racism, still asks his Boston audience to adopt a Mexican perspective by fantastically imagining the Charles River as the Rio Grande and then envisioning a border war between Cambridge and Boston (*A Sermon of War*). Other U.S.–Mexican War texts, such as James Fenimore Cooper's *Jack Tier; or,*

The Florida Reef (1848), Albert Gallatin's "Peace with Mexico" (1847), and even George Lippard's *Legends of Mexico* (1847), all in various ways give some due to Mexican history, motives, and anguish. To look for Mexico or the U.S.–Mexican War in Biglow's dialect passages is not to search for the unusual or eccentric. It is only to note that his verse elides the cost to Mexico, and instead, like many Whigs, frets about the ideological consequences to the United States.

Within Biglow's protest lies a pastoral isolationism premised on a resistance to impurity and change and for that reason in paradoxical sympathy with the desire to take Mexico's northern lands. Both Biglow and the expansionists rely on notions of utopian, and exclusionary, Anglo-Saxon qualities whose teleological aim is a pure Anglo-Saxon democracy. In O'Sullivan's 1845 "Annexation" newspaper column, for example, the "overspreading" of America is envisioned as the substitution of Anglo-Saxons for Mexicans. O'Sullivan, who also opposed the U.S.–Mexican War, predicts that California will soon go the way of Texas as an "irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration" takes over (9).⁸ The aim is not colonialism, but painless ethnic cleansing, the erasure of a Mexican presence. This is one reason why the terms of imperialism never fully capture or explain the conflict with Mexico. The initial project in the American Southwest was not about governing Mexicans, but about eradicating them from an Anglo-Saxon preserve. When Biglow hopes for a pure nation unsullied by Southern slave-owners, he is expressing a vision of cultural purity much like O'Sullivan's—and like Walt Whitman's infamous editorial jingoism: "What has miserable, inefficient Mexico," wrote Whitman "with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race?" (2). The key term is "race," and here it means Anglo-Saxon in a way that moves beyond "white" to take in notions of cultural unity, ideological coherence, and nationalist belief. Like other dreams of ethnic essentialism, Anglo-Saxonism is an exclusionary proposition endlessly policing its internal domains. The distinctions arise along geographic terms, but both expansionism into Mexican land and Biglow's anti-war isolationism imagine an eternal boundary against alien others.

Biglow opposes the war, but he does so as a cultural essentialist. His Yankee dialect and his call for separation and purification denote

a dream of a pure America. When Biglow drawls in his down-home Yankee talk, he is appealing to a desire for Anglo-Saxon ethnic purity at a time when the United States is increasingly less pure. One might draw out a long list of parallels to the contemporary military collision in Iraq and the home-spun dialect identity markers in President George W. Bush's speeches, but such a digression would dilute the significance the U.S.–Mexican War has had for Mexican and Mexican Americans long established in the United States. My study aims less at broad political criticism, and more at a specific cultural interrogation examining why it is that to remember the U.S.–Mexican War is to shatter the illusion of timeless national continuity. Biglow resists that kind of question, but another character in Lowell's triad, Birdofredum Sawin, offers precisely the kind of Yankee dialect deeply informed by the Mexican space. Buffoonish and hapless, Sawin is internally troubled by an effort to synthesize national essentialism and international contact. Like many combat veterans, he spends time in intense self-reflection, his thoughts disturbing definitions and interrupting the flow of time.

THE INTERSTITIAL MOMENT OF BIRDOFREDUM SAWIN

In the picaresque and buffoonish Sawin, Lowell brings the U.S.–Mexican War's particularity and Yankee dialect to an unsteady convergence. In his first letter from the Mexican front lines, Sawin questions the duplicitous Anglo-Saxonism fueling the war. He thus challenges Biglow's exceptionalism, but in the fictional staging of the *Papers* all of Sawin's letters are recast into verse by Biglow and thus use the same Yankee speech associated with incorruptible truth. At one level, nothing much changes because both Yankees (Biglow and Sawin) verify that to speak Yankee is to tell the truth. But Sawin is a fundamentally different kind of New Englander, one who has ventured into Mexico, shot at and presumably killed Mexicans, and has had time to reflect on the experience. Although Biglow rewrites Sawin's letters, he does not erase their skepticism, which emanates not, as does Biglow's, from a transcendental utopian ideal, but from the messier, murderous realm of military violence. The war volunteer is still a Yankee, still closely related to truth-talking Brother Jonathan or Uncle Sam figures, but fighting Mexicans in Mexico raises unsettling questions about Anglo-Saxon identity.

Again, the awkward roughness of Lowell's text demands nuanced interpretation. Sawin's first letter, initially published in August 1847, tackles the U.S–Mexican War and military aggression.⁹ The other two, published after the war, portray a figure who might as well be an entirely different character, a racist, politically cynical, opportunistic figure stupidly unsuccessful in his attempts to use his military enlistment for political gain. Sawin goes as far in his other letters as to celebrate his mendacity. Where the first letter exhibits a degree of social criticism and empathy with Mexico, in the other two the country simpleton undergoes a transformation into an imbecilic failure. Larger issues abound here as Sawin's collapse into brutish racism unmasks Biglow's dialect truth-talk in all its essentialist horror. Nevertheless, of Sawin's letters, only the first deals squarely with the morality of the U.S–Mexican War, making it the one instance in the work as a whole where Lowell's Yankee dialect speaks about Mexico.

Sawin might disintegrate into an amoral buffoon, but his initial response to combat duty in Mexico attacks American hypocrisy with a lively, stabbing critique. With wry understatement, Sawin articulates the ideological problem of an unwarranted, racist, imperialist war:

Afore I come away from hum I hed a strong persuasion
 Thet Mexicans worn't human beans,—an ourang outang nation,
 A sort o'folks a chap could kill an' never dream on't arter,
 No more'n a feller'd dream o'pigs thet he hed hed to slarter;
 I'd an idee thet they were built arter the darkie fashion all,
 An' kickin' colored folks about you know, 's a kind o' national;
 But wen I jined I worn't so wise ez thet air queen o' Sheby,
 Fer, come to look at 'em, they ait' much diff'rent from wut we be,
 An' here we air ascrougin' 'em out o'thir own dominions,
 Ashelterin' 'em, ez Caleb [Cushing¹⁰] sez, under our eagle's pinions,
 Wich means to take a feller up jest by the slack o' 's trowsis
 An' walk him Spanish clean right out o' all his homes an' houses;
 Wal, it doos seem a curus way, but then hooraw fer Jackson!
 It must be right, fer Caleb sez it's reg'lar Anglosaxon.

.....

Thet our nation's bigger'n theirn an' so its right air bigger,
 An' thet it's all to make 'em free thet we air pullin' trigger,
 Thet Anglo Saxondom's idee's abreakin' 'em to pieces,

An' thet idee's thet every man doos jest wut he damn pleases;
Ef I don't make his meanin' clear, perhaps in some respex I can,
I know thet "every man" don't mean a nigger or a Mexican;
An' there's another thing I know, an' thet is, ef these creeturs,
Thet stick an Anglosaxon mask onto State-prison feeturs,
Should come to Jaalam Centre fer to argify an' spout on 't,
The gals 'ould count the silver spoons the minnit they cleared out on't.
(62–63)

The passage captures that moment when a soldier begins to suspect that what the war is really about has little or no relation to what he has been told about it. In this case, Sawin's Mexican experience begins to impinge on Anglo-Saxonist supremacism. Once a true believer, he realizes that he may have been hoodwinked into an immoral war. When Lowell has Sawin explore the terms of "every man" and then claim that it does not mean "a nigger or a Mexican," he is exposing hypocrisy just as forcefully as the other *Papers* do when they lambaste politicians. If the generals and politicians lie, then what's the point of trying to do the right thing? To this extent, Sawin remains within the realm of moral certainty from which Lowell's plain-talking Yankees never travel far. And yet, Sawin's satire is discomfiting because it illuminates how a national mythology can be used for evil ends, how having a conviction is no guarantee of having the right one. Those "Anglo-Saxon" verities inherent in Yankee speech begin to seem slightly suspicious, even a bit foolish.

Lowell hedges his bet. Sawin is careful not to chastise Anglo-Saxonist belief, but merely its incorrect, immoral appropriation, the sticking of an "Anglosaxon mask" on sheer criminality. Perhaps Americans just need a few authentically countrified prophets to speak the truth in an Anglo-Saxon dialect, a few "ain'ts" and "gosh-darns" bubbling up in frothy witticisms. But if "Anglosaxon" can "mask" the truth, then simply speaking in that idiom, playing that role, is no guarantee of the righteous path. All this aims reflexively at Biglow and at a powerful fantasy wherein to talk like an authentic Anglo-Saxon is always to tell the truth, to escape the deceits of standard English, as if Yankee farmers simply cannot think up lies. Thus Sawin may sound like Biglow, but his role in *The Biglow Papers* is to undermine any easy reliance on the delusions of rustic authenticity and morality. He embodies both Biglow's aggressive idealism and the radical doubt that permeates Wilbur's

manic musings, and like Biglow, he too has real-world counterparts. The surviving military memoirs show that Sawin's self-consciousness has much in common with the writings of soldiers and volunteers who saw real combat.

Composing action-packed reports from the U.S.–Mexican War's frontlines was a popular activity, even if some of the letters were more invention than reportage (Johanssen 148–54). One estimate in 1848 claimed that between one thousand and fifteen hundred “printers” and reporters traveled with the invading army—the contemporary term would be “embedded.” These mobile correspondents established newspaper operations along the way or sent dispatches to families and newspapers in the United States (Roth 103–4). One of the distinguishing elements in these accounts is their quasi-ethnographic interest in Mexican people and Mexican society, altogether to be expected in curious Americans who found themselves living among Mexicans when not attacking them.

Sawin's own experience with combat leads chiefly to disillusionment, but a corollary response can be an affinity for the territory being invaded. Indeed, the disillusionment depends on the ability to at least momentarily assume the enemy's perspective. With notable exceptions such as the routinely negative assessment of General Santa Anna, many invading United States officers lauded the bravery or demeanor of their Mexican equivalents. They occasionally dined with them or with other members of the Mexican upper classes, often praising the social performances of the Mexican elite in balls and galas.¹¹ Such alliances among aristocrats are not surprising, but occasionally rank-and-file members of the invading army also expressed a wider curiosity and empathy. A dramatic instance (not the only one) is found within the frontline correspondence of Lieutenant Theodore Laidley. In a series of private musings, Laidley charts a radical change in attitude toward the enemy. He begins with a hostile disdain for Mexicans as “a great set of cowards” (McCaffrey 57), but gradually tempers these views with curiosity about Mexico, and sympathy for Mexicans. As the war ends, he declares that he intends to learn Spanish and wishes he did not have to leave Mexico so soon (128–29). Similar gestures of understanding, admiration, and at times affection, can be found in other war memoirs, even if many also express the anti-Mexicanism of the era.

None of this is to claim that United States troops were generally sympathetic to Mexicans, but it does suggest that Sawin's fictional first letter from the frontlines, where he discovers that Mexicans are not "much diff'rent from wut we be," captures a real response to the Mexican enemy: a mirroring that broadens perspectives. By contrast, Alamo battle myths—to reference a widely known narrative—re-establish absolute boundaries defined by sacrificial death; in the Alamo's final confrontation, Anglo-Americans and Mexicans crystallize in static, mythic opposition. Even in Texas, relatively few "Remember San Jacinto" because the point of the Alamo myth is not history, not the final victory that led to an alternate American republic in the slaveholding south, but rather the ideologically conclusive deaths that draw firm lines between absolutes: tyrannical (Mexican in this case) and free (always American).

The U.S.–Mexican War, on the other hand, is about a more complex process of nationalization that draws both distinctions and equivalences. In occupied Santa Fe, New Mexico, General Stephen W. Kearny in 1846 reportedly offered a somewhat odd toast given the circumstances to his recently conquered Mexican dinner guests: "The U.S. and Mexico—They are now united, may no one ever think of separating." That military invasion somehow functions to unite two peoples might seem to miss the point entirely, and yet Susan Magoffin, who would write her own account of her travels into northern realm of Mexico and who attended the dinner, wrote later that the Mexicans responded with a round of "viva's" (Christman 128). The paradox informing certain kinds of expression about the U.S.–Mexican War lies in the fact that both nations could indeed be conceived as equivalent republics. Especially early in the war, "American" and "Mexican" national identities for some writers could seem amorphous, secondary, even interchangeable between two "sister republics" having a momentary disagreement. Distinctions could momentarily flicker and slip in the act of their construction.

So it is not only that Sawin can objectify the United States, but also that he threatens to erase the distinction between Mexican and American. And that tends to place Americans in their enemy's place. Here the erasure of the U.S.–Mexican War from the collective American memory coincides with the promulgation of triumphalist dime-novel/Hollywood western narratives of westward expansion. The myth of the

American West denies any national encounter that valorizes the presence of a competing nation, the operative problem of the U.S.–Mexican War. The war was and remains ideologically menacing because it continually challenges the broader and extant notions of a purposeful, redemptive American identity—“America” is not alone, not boundless, not “racially pure,” not really a global force for liberty, not actually God’s chosen, and not even very different from the Old World with its wars and empires. The claim of absolute difference dissolves under the high pressure of military facts. The United States are indeed different; Americans are not Europeans. But neither are they isolated from the currents of time. Mexico and the U.S.–Mexican War make physical and visible what American myth suppresses in part because Mexico manifests the rejected Americas that United States exceptionalism elides in its rhetorical dramas of self-definition. A *nationally* defined enemy—an opposing nation—would allow for possible racial similarities, recognizably equivalent class divisions, and a mutual boundary that separates not beliefs, but the far more concrete and mundane territories of the Mexican North and United States Southwest. God makes truth; people make maps. The U.S.–Mexican War nationalizes the United States, turning it into a non-exceptional country with the most conventional motives and the most ordinary of people, people like Parson Homer Wilbur, the work’s editorial voice and its most intriguing character.

THE VOICE OF DISILLUSION

Wilbur’s opening musings link Yankees and essential Englishness, and thus he seems to challenge my contention that he most vividly demonstrates the relationship between Mexico and epistemological uncertainty. But though Wilbur announces the key claims about an American “authentic” English, the rest of his meditations obsessively focus on the unreliability of language. If Wilbur can be said to stand for anything, he stands for a fundamentally suspicious attitude toward claims of truth, i.e. of standing for anything. Said another way, Wilbur disavows the possibility of an essentializing Anglo-Saxonist language, the theory of which he himself has elaborated. In rather straightforward terms, Lowell undermines the parson’s opening ethnic proclamations with a torrent of nervous commentaries about linguistic ambivalence. This alone would be enough to elevate Wilbur’s editorializing above

Biglow's platitudes and Sawin's one-dimensional redneck humor. The parson's paradox, however, is that though he doesn't trust words, he's very good at using them to demonstrate his doubts. He acts, writes and thinks from outside the projects of national supremacy in part because he is self-conscious about his ability to invoke the propaganda. He can preach the Anglo-Saxonist gospel, yet like Arthur Dimmesdale, he dwells in existential confusion, interpreting his own interpretations and predisposed to anxiety and paralysis.¹²

I focus here on two key and related features of Wilbur's role in *The Biglow Papers*: first, throughout the text, the most frequent and pointed allusions to the U.S.–Mexican War occur in Wilbur's musings, as if the zone of anxiety were best suited to the facts of Mexico; and second, Wilbur is the focal point for an ensemble of multiple languages and linguistic registers that emphasize mutability and profound uncertainty. Lowell opposed the war for conventional abolitionist reasons (Wortham, Introduction xii–xv), and I find no evidence that Lowell consciously developed Wilbur with an eye toward linking Mexico and the U.S.–Mexican War with narrative disruption. Nevertheless, whenever Wilbur criticizes America for national hypocrisy—the common argument—he typically dwells on false appearances, false words, and false beliefs and never, significantly, proposes the ready options of American mythology. There are no confident appeals to 1776 or to sacred “barthrights.”

Instead, the agonized parson remains trapped in verbose self-contemplation, overwhelmed by the dilemmas of conquest and of the U.S.–Mexican War. Whereas Biglow, in full-throated Yankee drawl, concentrates on solipsistic satires of politics and journalism, and Sawin eventually self-destructs in a pathetically racist scheme, a far more cosmopolitan Wilbur continually compares the United States to other nations and histories. True, Biglow and Sawin (Sawin more indirectly) both criticize the war as unjust, but they do so mainly in their first entries. Wilbur attacks the war from start to finish, peppering his critiques with asides about the global history of conquest—British imperialism, Spanish adventurism in the Americas, the Crusades. If anything, he intensifies his anti-war commentary in the latter entries, makes it more self-reflexive, harsher. To cite only a few examples, Wilbur critiques Protestant militantism in reference to the Naboth-Ahab story

(Lowell 66), which is, pointedly, about territorial theft; he ridicules those who would claim “Our country, however bounded” (73); and he tragi-comically itemizes the sordid gains and terrible costs of the war (127). Then in a particularly revealing passage late in the book, Wilbur collapses the distance between himself and the war volunteer, bringing together his critique of the war and a tough-minded foray into the traps of language:

I find a parallel to Mr. Sawin’s fortune in an adventure of my own. For shortly after I had first broached to myself the before-stated natural-historical and archaeological theories, as I was passing, *haec negotia penitus mecum revolvens*, through one of the obscure suburbs of our New England metropolis, my eye was attracted by these words upon a sign-board,—CHEAP CASH-STORE. Here was at once the confirmation of my speculations, and the substance of my hopes. Here lingered the fragment of a happier past, or stretched out the first tremulous organic filament of a more fortunate future. Thus glowed the distant Mexico to the eyes of Sawin, as he looked through the dirty pane of the recruiting-office window, or speculated from the summit of that mirage-Pisgah which the imps of the bottle are so cunning to raise up. (129)

Uncertain, self-conscious, and tending toward bitterness, Wilbur here captures the paralysis of his own musings. He writes from an unwritable realm where signs are illusionary lures that mistakenly confirm speculations and falsely represent the substance of hopes. Wilbur is uncertain whether the illusion points to the past, “or” to the future; the “dirty pane” alludes to a glass through which we see but darkly, “or,” a fantasy dreamed from the perspective of an illusionary mountain. The present moment is diffused by a momentary pause at the sign of “distant Mexico,” which points the reader simultaneously to “past” and/or “future.” More ambiguously, Wilbur distrusts rationality rendered as “speculations,” with that term’s overtones of capitalistic opportunism, but also steps away from non-rational belief, the “hopes” as illusions from an imaginary Pisgah. The ideal of the Mexican prize—whether it be glory, land, or economic advancement—is an illusion, but as illusion a threat to the comforts of both worldly gains *and* spiritual comforts. Mexico here is a place without exits.

Nothing in Yankee dialect anywhere else in the work approaches the sustained self-criticism, self-reflection, doubt—and finally fear—found in such critiques of military aggression against Mexico. Wilbur consistently speaks about worldly boundaries rather than boundlessness and thus defines U.S. American actions in mundane, terrestrial terms. To see Mexico as a wealthy “neighbor Naboth” means that U.S. America is an Ahab whose sin is rather pedestrian greed; to view Mexico from a “mirage-Pisgah” indicts Manifest Destiny itself; finally, to reduce the war to economic satire is to make explicit its worldly gains as well as costs. Wilbur’s criticisms of the war tend to see the United States as a mundane, flawed nation, not one nation under God, but one nation among others, all just as mortal.

Lowell’s ambivalence about expansion highlights a tension between American mythology and contemporary nationalism, which by definition implies a world of equivalent nation-states. A nation cannot be God’s gift to history, and, at the same time, be outvoted at the United Nations. Among recent literary and cultural critics, Homi Bhabha offers a useful interpretive strategy when he explores the conflicted, self-aware, always recurrent “performative” domain of national identity. If the “nation,” as he claims, is a mode of disjunctive temporality, the “measure of liminality of cultural modernity,” (139–70), then the strong, nationalizing effect of the U.S.–Mexican War may be discerned not so much in the claims of purity, tradition, and destiny, but rather in the Wilburian writings that exhibit the counter anxieties of the “irredeemably plural modern space” of the modern nation (149). Wilbur speaks from within just such a conflicted zone of troubled nationality, a figure of nationalism precisely because he embodies tensions, contradictions, and pluralities. Far more than merely suggesting disjunctive open-endedness, Lowell makes it his work’s governing characteristic and he most clearly locates it within *The Biglow Papers*’ most important topic: language itself. Wilbur might worry about Mexico, but he fixates on words. Indeed, through the parson, Lowell deploys *The Biglow Papers*’ most basic contradiction: the elaboration of a comedy based on an essentialist dialect surrounded by an array pluralizing languages flowing forth from breaks in history and fabrications of identity.

The linguistic play is intense and chaotic: Greek phrases, passages in Latin, ordinary prose, pedantic prose, Yankee dialect, voices impersonating other voices, real figures inventing fictional figures, fic-

tional figures referring to the real, or themselves inventing fictions, and moments where the very nature of language and its relation to reality is brought forward for direct examination. The effect is not incoherence, but dismay. The exaggerated abundance of voices and languages implies an agonistic self-awareness at the opposite pole from a Yankee farmer grounded in a belief that truth and reality can be made manifest in an authentic dialect. Not long after his introductory spiel about the wisdom to be found in Yankee speech, the troubled parson turns to the unsteady relationships among words, knowledge, and truth. He postulates that Satan “must be a semeiologist the most expert” (64). He declares that a satirist should take aim at “Falsehood,” but adds that “Truth is quite beyond the reach of satire” (69). He jabs at political speeches in Congress, claiming he has discovered that “nothing takes longer in the saying than anything else” (91). Descending into a state of linguistic helplessness, he becomes aware of the relationship between language and human limitations. The constant worrying drone suffuses almost every paragraph—all of them obsessed with the dangers and limits of words and accompanied by a posturing with Latin and Greek and an inflated English rhetoric.

Just as the fictional Biglow and Sawin have real-life counterparts, Wilbur too parallels a component of actual U.S.–Mexican War discourse. Theodore Parker, for example, delivered a post-war sermon on the conflict in June 1848 that ran through a series of communal maladies similarly emerging from a corruption of social discourse: “The cost of the war in money and men I have tried to calculate,” Parker told his congregation, “but the effect on the morals of the people—on the Press, the Pulpit, and the Parties—and through them on the rising generation, it is impossible to tell” (*Sermon of the Mexican War* 45). As if taking his cue from Parker, Lowell’s targets in *The Biglow Papers* are exactly the “Press, the Pulpit and the Parties,” that is, the immoral manipulation of rhetoric in newspapers, sermons and congressional speeches. The feared corruption of public discourse constitutes an example of Thomas Gustafson’s Thucydidean moment of social collapse.¹³ From a mythological perspective, from the perspective of narrative, the U.S.–Mexican War stands for fragmentation and dissolution against which the Civil War later would become the re-confirmation of true American identity. Many see the U.S.–Mexican War as a preface to the Civil War, but it is better to see it as an antithesis—Chapultepec as the fissure, Gettysburg the seal.

Ultimately, what drives Wilbur's semiotic trepidation, the historical Parker's jeremiad and also a number of mass-market fictions in which Mexicans could be both heroic equals and corrupt anachronisms, is a self-conscious awareness of the fragility of American essentialism when placed against the history of the war against Mexico. To read into the war, or to travel into Mexico, is to see that the great national story is a lie—or perhaps might be a lie. For a nation that invokes a manifest destiny and a great order of history, the hand of God in its affairs, to call into question exceptionalist self-definitions risks awakening not to a new faith, but to the loss of faith. The more Wilbur contemplates the war, the more he worries about knowing, understanding, and believing.

Regardless of how one understands the flights of fiction within fiction, the sprinkling of Greek and Latin within English prose, and the counter-voices of Yankee dialect used to express both noble (Biglow) and base (Sawin) sentiments, Lowell's dialogism stands resolutely against the romances of dialect. Where dialect seeks to find a single authentic voice, multi-vocality emphasizes contingent beliefs and values. Where dialect charges a particular region with foundational authority, a plurality of voices declares any final authority to be elusive if not impossible. Where dialect stands for eternal verities and against "book learning," Wilbur's pretentious quoting in Latin and Greek work against unified stabilities as these "dead" languages accentuate differences in class and education. The impressive semiotic acrobatics are consonant with the very stresses of nation-making. As Bhabha writes, "the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space—representing the nation's modern territoriality is turned into the archaic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism" (149). As the "nation" comes into being in the nineteenth century, culturally, geographically, and ideologically, the messy facts of ambivalent reality must be transmuted into eternal continuities.

It is worth asking why the U.S.–Mexican War in particular is charged with disruptive energy. Do not all wars lead away from coherence? Or are there specific qualities in the conflict with Mexico that make this war particularly resistant to narrative resolution? Yes to both questions. Wars bring chaos, destruction and death, and often, the annihilation of worlds, the truth Mark Twain's messenger angel preaches to an uncomprehending congregation in *The War Prayer*. The United States inva-

sion of Mexico in 1846, however, is characterized by historical elements that intensify its disruptive potential, the dynamics of which can be brought to the foreground through Bakhtin's analysis of genre and context.

First, the novel's polyglossia signals a world of multi-national relations that Bakhtin identifies as a historical condition for the rise of the novel, a genre which in his view stands against genre itself. It is indeed possible to read *The Biglow Papers*—albeit eccentrically—as a novel drawn to the “spontaneity of the inconclusive present” (Bakhtin 27), a text which cannot be labeled as poetry or prose and which thus stands against form itself. In a passing note, Leon Howard, another Lowell biographer, notes that Lowell actually considered turning his satire into a novel, indicating that Lowell sensed how his project had escaped the confines of poetic form (241). Novelistic linguistic play and national self-consciousness, Bakhtin claims, are linked; the disruptions of the novel can be seen as emerging from “a very specific rupture in the history of European civilization: its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semi-patriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships” (11). Ultimately, the parodic play on nearly every page of Lowell's satire is largely, though not exclusively, an effect of the disruptive contact with an “international and interlingual” presence, not only in the form of Mexico, but also an effect of increasing immigration from other nations. Mexico, however, affords a paradigmatic contrast. Whereas previous enemies were culturally similar (tyrannical England) or viewed as uncivilized (terroristic Native Americans), Mexico offered an enemy both culturally distinct and civilized at the same time.

“Mexico” is certainly not the beginning point of international consciousness in America, but it is a zone of heightened reflection about identity in a global realm. Many saw victory in Mexico as necessary to prove to Europe the United State had at last arrived as a real nation. Yet, despite the protestations of O'Sullivan's Manifest Destiny, “Mexico” destroys the illusions of isolation, purity, and coherence. It is not precisely the Spanish language, or the Mexican people that are troubling, but Spanish and Mexicans as embodiments of that which Bakhtin describes as “verbal-ideological decentering” (370), a perspective that stresses hesitant resistance, doubt, second-guessing, caution, self-consciousness, circumspection. Bakhtin's dialectic approach

stresses how monologism and heteroglossia are always both in play and present in every "utterance," and thus it is a simplification to claim that there are monologic languages (mythic) and heteroglossic counter-languages (real-world) (270–73). The world is not improved, necessarily, by believing that all one needs to do is engage in heteroglossia. For Lowell the broad play of voices does not lead to a more optimistic, more democratic society. It enacts, instead, a persistent unease.

Another Bakhtinian approach to the U.S–Mexican War highlights the issue of time, specifically, the present-ness of the U.S–Mexican War. Lowell's Wilbur is the most critical of the national teleology, but to question the national *telos* is to argue for a falling back into the stream of historical change. In this zone, Bakhtin writes, "time and the world become historical," emerging into a "real future" in an "unconcluded process." "Every event," he adds, "every phenomenon, every thing, every object of artistic representation loses its completedness, its hopelessly finished quality and its immutability that had been so essential to it in the world of the epic 'absolute past,' walled off by an unapproachable boundary from the continuing and unfinished present" (30). Bakhtin's argument is that the "present," which he aligns with the novel, cannot be mythologized because it is by definition always moving into the future (*ibid.*). Rather overtly, the U.S–Mexican War in a work such as Lowell's is an event not yet completed, a war in process, or too recently concluded, and therefore uncertain. Not at all fazed by theoretical constraints, dozens of writers of the moment set about writing epic poems and nationalist fictions, complete with eagles, star-spangled banners, references to Washington and 1776, and so on. If they really wanted to memorialize God's country, Bakhtin would have advised them to wait. This is of course a characteristic of Mexican war literature rather than the U.S–Mexican War which historians remind us ended in 1848 with a treaty—unless, that is, one sees the border between the United States and Mexico as always in conflict, always a bit militarized, whether the troops are in blue (1848), or dark green (2007).¹⁴ It is hard to write a mythic war story when the war isn't quite finished.

Finally, one other aspect of the U.S–Mexican War coincides with Bakhtin's sense of the double-voice in language, the way words are scenes of contestation and argument, which he sees as critical in the development of heteroglossic writing. Bakhtin claims that the Greek language already contained within it latent disruptive, parodying ener-

gies rooted in the pasts of people who preceded the Greeks. "Behind these gross facts [of Greece's own monologic history] a complex trial-at-arms is concealed, a struggled between languages and dialects, between hybridization, purifications, shifts and renovations, the long and twisted path of struggle for the unity of a literary language and for the unity of its system of genres" (66). In a similar sense, the Mexican population in the U.S. Southwest deploys an always present pre-history, pre-language, which novelizes the concept "America" and which dialectically generates the projects of unification and exclusion. The intensely critical parodic force in *Chicanismo* or *rasquachismo* in the later twentieth century is an echo of the Mexican pre-history, but already in Lowell's Wilbur the awareness of the Mexican point of view grounds the sharpest national critique. Wilbur is never in any way Mexicanized, of course, but he is clearly placed in a state of exile, always the observer, never a participant, keenly attuned to the fragility, the corrosiveness, of words.

MEXICO AS METAPHOR

The disruptive particularity of the U.S.–Mexican War should not be over-stressed, nor should the continuing power of nationalism be under-estimated. The projects of nation-states continue to exhibit horrific acts of ethnic violence. Claims that epics are anachronistic or that cultural myths are irrelevant seem beside the point in the present age. But nationalism aims in two opposite directions, toward the internal that excludes outsiders, and toward the external to a world where all other nations are deemed equivalent with one's home nation. Nineteenth-century nationalism in the United States troubles the myth of Manifest Destiny—and prompts it—precisely because of its relational aspects, the sense that modern nations arise interdependently with other nations. For Anthony Smith, nationalism is the modern iteration of an older myth of communal exceptionality, now circulating in a world of "polycentric uniqueness" (84). In this mode, every culture, "even the least developed and elaborated, possesses some 'value' that is irreplaceable and may contribute to the total fund of human cultural values" (*ibid.*). This is what nags Parson Wilbur in particular and *The Biglow Papers* in general: a dawning realization that not only other nation-states exist in the world, but more troubling perhaps, that other North American nation-states with utopian projects exist precisely within the terrain supposedly set aside for a timeless U.S. America. The

invasion of Mexico, as Lowell seems to have sensed, disrupts the very foundations of American belief, action, and identity.

Anxieties persist. Mexico as a nation and Mexicans as a people disturb the United States social landscape because they continue to stand for the passage of time. They disturb the solace found in a providential notion of U.S. American destiny. They move within the collective consciousness as avatars of the real world, troubling the desires of the imagination. Within the current matrix of dominant U.S. American society, Mexican Americans, or the images of Mexican Americans, are not categorically other, but people who perform and exhibit the processes of change and reassessment, people who stand against the comforts of singular self-definition. Such notions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans draw forth the language of U.S. American exceptionalism because they continually challenge its existence. This is why the cultural debates about Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States worry less about race or class than they do about national destiny. Mass media accounts about Mexican Americans, such as Huntington's recent offering, are typically quasi-fictional, usually nervous, forays into America's future, worrying less about who Americans are and more about who Americans once were and ought again to be.

Huntington's anxiety regarding Mexican Americans exemplifies the contemporary Anglo-Saxonist rhetoric. His anti-Mexican cultural analysis imposes the separation it claims to fear between "Anglos" and "Mexicans." With a characteristic drive toward closure that insists on strong definitions, he claims that there is "no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English" (256). A great deal can be criticized in Huntington's argument, but suffice it here to point out, first, that the fragment seems to worry about a dichotomy between the "American" domain and that of Mexico, but what it actually fears is—not the demise of Anglo-Protestant culture—but its alteration, its potential for hybridization, which would be evidence of its plasticity. To declare Mexican American culture as incompatible with the United States preserves, among other things, the premise of a distinct, eternal, utopian Anglo-Protestantism that magically bestows the benefits of the American Dream to Mexicans as long as they learn English and convert to an

American civil religion. That history disputes this equation is too vast a subject for this essay, but Huntington's aim is not really history, nor even a critique of Mexican Americans. Rather, he desires to bolster a strict division between American ideals and the rest of the world. *Who Are We?* projects Mexican Americans as signs of global pressures on the United States, forces both mundane and contingent. The Rio Grande is not just an international border; it is *the* international border.

Mexico from the beginning of its conflict with the United States has exerted pressure on Anglo-American self-perceptions. Mexicans and Mexican Americans challenge essentialists like Huntington because they can, in a way, be viewed as protean actors who by being "Mexican" American already imply a global blurring of the American border. They can be said to resist also the bifurcations of race, class, gender, language, and finally nationality. Mexicans and Mexican Americans are, after all, diverse and economically and racially stratified, both immigrant and native, and, in a broad historical sense, fully as American as "Americans." This resistance to easy categorization is the contact point between Lowell's *Biglow Papers* from 1848 and the ongoing Mexican/United States experience; both raise questions of epistemology and meaning-making. Through Lowell's work we gaze into a heated crucible in which the U.S–Mexican War acts against American identity. The war brought the United States into a dialectic with a world deemed to be antithetical, but it yielded also the complex terrains of variation and equivalence. This is what beams from Lowell's prism: the presumably singular light breaks into a spectrum of illuminations, hazy shadows, and near total darkness. Within the rhetoric of United States exceptionalism, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans stand for the passages of nations. They appear from the unknown future. They complicate race and class by questioning viability of any identities that presume an escape from history. The stasis that characterizes Willbur emerges from the shattering of national belief as America gazes across the Mexican terrain and sees uncertain boundaries and approaching mortalities. At its best, *The Biglow Papers* testifies to Lowell's most daring vision, a work that questions national coherence with the U.S–Mexican War's shifting spectral reflections.

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NOTES

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1. U.S.-Mexican War historical studies have a long history even if the war itself is elided in most popular discussions of United States history itself. The war has been a continuing subject of documentary investigation from 1848 forward, largely through efforts to romanticize and justify a controversial invasion. A more critical, twentieth-century examination of the U.S.-Mexican War can be said to have begun with Fuller and then gained new relevance with Schroeder's Vietnam-Era study. More recent histories include Eisenhower, and Winder. Also crucial to U.S.-Mexican War studies is Sandweiss, Stewart and Huseman. Recently, Mexicans and Latina and Latino scholars have produced new historical studies including Rodríguez. Mexican historiography has been highlighted by the work of Vázquez, and Robinson's translations of Mexican writings.

2. There are two series of *Biglow Papers* by Lowell. Here, unless otherwise indicated, I refer to the First Series of 1848; the second collection was published in 1867. The *Papers* first appeared individually from June 1846 to September 1848 in the *Boston Courier* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Several date from after the war's conclusion (Wortham xv-xxiv).

3. Another distinction must also be made between the First Series and a Second Series of *Biglow Papers* published in 1867, a similar collection of dialect poems and essays, but constituting a Unionist response to the Civil War. The Second Series suffers in comparison with the First, but it presents a retrospective introduction that captures Lowell's own interpretation of his characters and country-rustic humor. Here, Lowell explains that he had always believed the U.S.-Mexican War a "national crime committed in behoof of Slavery" and that he wanted to put his thoughts in the language of the common New Englander. The invention of Wilbur, he added, was meant to be more of a "complement rather than the antithesis of his parishioner" (441).

4. Lowell's "Yankee" dialect that purports to correspond to a New England culture is one version of a more generalized white ethnic mode of speech opposing a supposedly civilized and thus disempowered form of elite English. The differences between Yankee and southern rural voices can seem slight or irrelevant because both value simplicity, rustic wisdom, and a durability absent from the "book-learning" of the urban cosmopolite.

5. Years before Lowell's Biglow appeared, Seba Smith was already publishing the *Letters of Major Jack Downing* in 1830, and Smith is considered to be the inaugurator of New England dialect as a forum for rustic humor. Smith's Downing, in fact, also wrote "letters" from Mexico City, notable for the way they avoid any sustained reference to Mexico or Mexicans. Rourke's study of American humor shows how the stock, plain-talking American Jonathan figure can be traced to Royall Tyler's play, *The Contrast*, 1787, and as early as the 1820s, rustic Yankees began appearing in blue coats and red-white striped pants, evolving into proto-Uncle Sam characters who embodied essential American-ness (17).

6. Bernbrock's dissertation from which I draw here offers an excellent guide into Walt Whitman's fascination with Anglo-Saxonist belief, and concisely notes the linguistic jingoism of many writers of the era, including Emerson's.

7. The emphasis on linguistic disturbance and war is explored in Gustafson. A critique of national hubris and a sense of doom are in fact at the center of Lowell's reaction to the war and most fully enunciated by Parson Wilbur.

8. Sampson's recent biography of O'Sullivan explores the writer's ideas regarding U.S. expansionism, and notes how O'Sullivan's negotiated a disdain for war with a belief in a redemptive American mission (194–207).

9. I follow Wortham's textual notes to track newspaper publication dates. Thus, the first Sawin letter appears in the *Boston Courier* August 18, 1847 when United States troops are preparing for the final, decisive attack on Mexico City. The second and third letter appeared, respectively, in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on July 6, 1848 and September 28, 1848, months after the war's conclusion with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

10. Caleb Cushing was a prominent New England Democrat who supported President Polk's war effort and served as a volunteer. He articulated typical expansionist rhetoric that emphasized the United States' destiny to conquer the Americas (Horsman 223).

11. Other military memoirs and frontline letters suggesting such varied attitudes toward Mexicans can be found in Williams; Peskin; Chance; and Ferrell.

12. In his introduction to his critical edition of *The Biglow Papers*, Wortham claims that Wilbur's commentaries are the "best prose [Lowell] wrote before the Civil War" and that the character of the wordy preacher is often dismissed because he is often misunderstood (xvi–xvii). My reading similarly locates Wilbur at the critical center of the work, constantly present and perhaps closest to Lowell's own voice and to a set of literary, philosophical, and political concerns regarding both language and writing.

13. In Gustafson's terms, Parson Wilbur is writing about a war marked by a "Thucydidean moment" of linguistic corruption and political demagoguery, a time when language is used for deception, and oratory becomes a force for social chaos and moral collapse. "The moment in history that Thucydides describes . . . , and

the moment he knows will always return in the course of human events, is that moment when first principles and founding words are hallowed in speech but violated in deeds, when an individual 'I' claiming to speak for a collective 'we' traduces the republican political grammar that subordinates 'I' to 'we,' when rhetoric becomes a debased form of political action—deceit or flattery—and when even a dialogue of deceit and flattery collapses into discord and separate monologues, and, finally when eloquence or *logos* becomes not the alternative to violence and the very power that distinguishes humans from the beasts but the inciter to or legitimator of immoral violence—the power that lowers us below beasts into the rungs of hell” (78). Gustafson drives his analysis toward the Civil War, but the earlier U.S.–Mexican War equally makes unmistakable the contradiction between United States actions and United States ideals; in 1846 the words were, manifestly, lies. Indeed, the link between imperialism and rhetorical fraud was openly visible to some in the process of expansion, as Gustafson notes: “More than one writer was provoked in mid-nineteenth-century America to repeat or echo Tacitus’ famous condemnation of the Romans for expanding their empire through the meanness of force and justifying their imperialism through the meanness of rhetorical fraud: . . . Eloquence, paired so often as the bride of liberty in the classical rhetorical tradition, must also be figured as the whore of empire” (98).

14. Limón articulates continuing warfare as a governing paradigm, and actuality, for South Texas border history and culture.

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