
Gustavus Stadler, Haverford College

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Abstract
The nature of genius has long been a subject of fascination and critique. Over the course of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the representative capacities of the idea of genius in the United States shifted toward an increasingly detailed, psychologized, and sexualized notion of the individual—genius as pathological subject. In Troubling Minds, Gustavus Stadler takes a broader view, locating in the concept of genius the predecessor to the modern idea of culture. In this book Stadler illuminates genius by examining its changing meanings in American discourses. For example, he unpacks the label of genius by viewing its volatility in relation to the political contingencies of the era, as U.S. society struggled with slavery, civil war, postwar reconciliation, and expansion. Stadler also reveals instances during this period of American history in which writers' uses of the word reflected changes in, as well as resistances to, the dominant understanding of the relationship between culture and politics. Engaging with writers and public figures including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, Jenny Lind, William Wells Brown, Louisa May Alcott, and Henry James, Troubling Minds demonstrates how racial, sexual, and class politics of the day influenced the perception of genius. Many critics today treat genius skeptically (if not with outright hostility) because they believe that it operates outside of history. Troubling Minds situates genius into a historical context, placing it firmly in a national intellectual discourse that was grappling not only with grave political crises but also with vast transformations in the ways in which literature was produced, distributed, and consumed. Stadler revitalizes the idea of genius and reintroduces it to our lingua franca. —publisher-supplied description

Troubling minds: the cultural politics of genius in the United States, 1840-1890


A Brief Biography of Brown. He was born in Lexington, Kentucky in 1815. His father was the white owner of the plantation on which Brown was born. Brown held many diverse jobs as a youth which provided him with firsthand knowledge of the slave era South which aided him in his writing. Brown escaped from slavery in January 1834. During his escape he received help from an Ohio Quaker named Wells Brown (whose name he adopted when he became a free man). Troubling Minds examines the category of "genius" as it circulated in the nineteenth-century United States, focusing on "the insight the category provides into the politics of deciding what counts as labor, especially in the cultural area" (168). This focus on the cultural work of genius goes a long way in complicating the Romantic notion that genius either transcends politics or is an innate gift. Ethnocultural politics in the United States (or ethnoreligious politics) refers to the pattern of certain ethnocultural or religious groups to vote heavily for one party. Groups can be based on ethnicity (such as Hispanics, Irish, Germans), race (blacks, Chinese Americans) or...
religion (Catholic or Protestant, etc.) or on overlapping categories (Irish Catholics).