
While the study of race has been a key component of literary scholarship on the nineteenth century, ethnicity—especially as a category describing hyphenated difference—has often been regarded as a phenomenon of the twentieth century. This is not surprising as ethnicity as a theoretical concept is a product of the 1940s. It was introduced by social scientists in the wake of Franz Boas’ cultural relativism to replace the tainted term ‘race’ and to enable a new beginning in sociology free of the conceptual baggage of scientific racism. The term ‘ethnicity’ first appeared in W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt’s *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (1944). Although ethnic diversity is regarded as one of the defining features of North American societies from the colonial period, in the nineteenth century this diversity was more often described as “cultural” or “national” specificity.

Jeanne Cortiel’s study addresses the interrelations between race and ethnicity in antebellum U.S. literature with the aim to bring a transnational perspective to the reading of this literature. She focuses on texts that were published around 1855, a time that she regards as an important cultural moment in the formation of race and ethnicity: Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855), Frederick Douglass’ *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), Walt Whitman’s first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and John Rollin Ridge’s *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854). Her study analyzes textual qualities in these antebellum texts that contributed “to the creation of ethnic selfhood and otherness” (15) in a period that was characterized by national self-consolidation around the concept of whiteness. Cortiel is particularly interested in the triangular structures of difference brought in by different cultures in encounter (e.g. the encounter between Africa, Europe and the United States) that in her view unsettle the binaristic structure of race.

In her introductory chapter, Cortiel points to the uneasy relationship of the concepts of race and ethnicity in scholarship that addresses both, and to the necessary distinction “between ethnicity as a concept that structures texts and social interaction and ‘ethnicity’ as a term used in sociological, historical, and literary scholarship to identify and analyze such structures” (17). While she admits that a projection of the twentieth-century sociological term ethnicity onto the antebellum period is ahistorical, she wants to make this very ahistoricity “a methodological asset” (36): she is convinced that using ethnicity as a method of exploring structures of difference in the mid-nineteenth century promises to open up new perspectives on the 1850s as a culturally significant moment.

Cortiel points out that each of the texts she chose for her study negotiates a fundamental duality or racial binary, while this duality is at the same time unsettled by a triangular relationship. This triangular relationship is driven by cultural difference as well as by the collision between different systems of signification that obstruct or even completely prevent communication, while at the same time moments of epistemological instability are introduced. In the chapter on Melville’s novella *Benito Cereno*, Cortiel demonstrates how the known binary racial structure of white and Black (Captain Delano and the slaves on the St. Dominick) is destabilized in various ways: by the inscrutability of the hatchet-polishers whose “barbarous din” references incomprehension rather than certain knowledge and points to cultural specificities the narrator cannot read; by the social difference between the mutiny’s leaders Babo and Atufal that can
be traced back to different class backgrounds in their native African societies; by the enigmatic behavior of “the Spaniard” Benito Cereno that evokes century-old cultural prejudices surrounding Spain in the American captain. The confusion these characters create in the narrator produce what Cortiel terms an “uncontrollable multiplicity” (80) that undermines the orderly Black-white binary. Other chapters in the book investigate similar triangulations. In the second chapter Cortiel situates Douglass’ My Bondage and My Freedom in the context of the nineteenth-century fascination with the Orient and in particular with Egypt. Douglass’ second autobiography constructs the author as “an exemplary representative of the nation” (85), while at the same time introducing a transnational aspect by presenting him as participating in Afrocentrist discourses and in orientalism. In tracing symbolic lineages to Egypt as well as to Europe (Scotland), Douglass evades the racial category of the “mulatto” that would have excluded him from American nationhood, counteracting the familiar binary between slave mother and slave-owning father. Similar to other African American writers who realized that they have to become foreign in order to become “ethnic,” (James Weldon Johnson comes to mind), Douglass presents himself as a multiple figure who, while operating within the known knowledge system, at the same time destabilizes the fixed categories of “Black” and “white.”

Often the destabilization of racial binaries in the texts under study results from a failure of communication due to contradictions, conflict, and multiplicity. In several of the texts Cortiel analyzes, the discourse of slavery is juxtaposed with discourses of difference that are much more obscure and that are linked to culture, not to biology. As Cortiel convincingly shows, the narrators of the novels she studies—those who claim to have full control over their representation of the “other” and who mediate between the audience and the otherness represented in the story—are often unable to “read” the cultural difference beyond the most blatant stereotypes. This is famously the case with Amasa Delano in Benito Cereno who misreads Babo and the Spanish captain, but it is equally true for the narrator of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp, a novel that has only recently received due critical attention. Cortiel highlights how in this novel, the Black characters’ coded hymn singing as well as their subversive interpretations of biblical texts undermine the narrator’s authority and create a discursive space that is independent of the narrator’s control. In doing so, she argues, these characters are able to develop a distinct ethnic voice and to deliver a critique of slavery.

In most of her chapters Cortiel looks not only at the texts themselves but also at the paratexts surrounding the original publication, such as frontispieces, title pages, epigraphs, and prefaces, as well as at other contemporaneous publications. In doing so, she explores the transtextual linkages in order to show how these texts dialogue with the larger cultural and political discourses of their era. This becomes very clear as she contextualizes the frontispieces of Douglass’ My Bondage and My Freedom and of Whitman’s 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass in the ethnographic discourses of their time, a period “when ethnographic iconography suggested that what is visible automatically becomes knowable” (169). Both Douglass and Whitman established visual public selves through these images in which they were able to resist contemporary racializing pictorial representations. As both images show the author looking directly at the viewer, Cortiel contends that “their steady gaze at the viewer suggests ‘you don’t know me,’ placing both of them outside the purview of ethnographic control” (169)—a suggestion that is supported by the texts’ strategies of enabling and privileging ethnic and cultural multiplicity.
Cortiel also discusses a novel in which the racial binary does not unfold between Black and white but between Anglo-Americans and Mexican Americans. John Rollin Ridge’s *Joaquin Murieta* dramatizes the violent conflicts in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands after the cession of northern Mexico to the United States when Mexican outlaws roamed California, threatening and robbing those who had settled on its territory. Written by a Cherokee author (and published under Ridge’s tribal name “Yellow Bird”), the novel narrates the events from a Native American perspective. Like in *Benito Cereno* and *Dred*, the plot of *Joaquin Murieta* is driven by interracial violence, however the ethnic triangulation that Cortiel sees at work here develops between Mexican, Anglo-American, and Cherokee interests: while the native narrator comments on the conflicts from a shifting perspective that sides first with the Mexican American rebel and later with his white opponents, the voice of the narrator “suggests congruities with both Mexicans and Anglo-Americans, without allowing either of them to ‘tell their own story’ directly” (244).

Apart from contextualizing the study of mid-nineteenth century American literature in a larger transnational framework and providing insights into the dynamics that evolved between the discourses of race and ethnicity in this period, Cortiel’s study is also enlightening in demonstrating how the five texts have been read and interpreted in the period since their first publication. Cortiel explores the “resonances” these texts have produced over time and the various meanings they have generated in the scholarship of various periods. This is particularly helpful in explaining the ongoing relevance of some of these texts in the more recent past and today: e.g., *Benito Cereno* was read as a “statement on evil and depravity” when it was published, became a statement against racism in the twentieth century and is read as “an engagement with the anxieties of terrorism” in the twenty-first century (32). Cortiel argues that “these texts are still so powerfully with us today not because the tension between race and ethnicity has remained unchanged as a kind of inherent transhistorical quality, but because they resonate with contemporary American culture in a particular way” (36).

The book is an important contribution to the study of race and ethnicity that helps to disentangle the interrelations and interdependencies in nineteenth-century American literature, as well as a welcome and necessary addition to early transnational American studies.

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