

JEANNE CORTIEL

# With a Barbarous Din

Race and Ethnic Encounter  
in Mid-Nineteenth-Century  
American Literature

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

Volume 266



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HEIKE PAUL





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For  
my sister

Natalie Cortiel

not so little



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## Introduction

A few years ago, I had a curious experience in a Houston, Texas, hotel lobby. The hotel receptionist, in describing her supervisor, said to me, with considerable unease, that the supervisor was “a woman of nation.” It turned out that the manager was Asian American. This puzzling transformation of phraseology substitutes “nation” for “color,” representing the urge, I suppose, to de-racialize the manager but still indicate the visibility of her otherness. It served to align me, the European, with the racially unmarked receptionist and thus repeated the whitening of American nationhood that has worked to exclude people of color from its beginnings. I was led to interpret her “of nation” as meaning “of visibly other nationality” here, which inadvertently implied a presence without true belonging. But to the receptionist, “nation” presumably had more dignity than “color,” displacing as it does the reference to the individual body by a contemporary notion of peoplehood. She thus creatively embraced a term that has been slippery since its heyday in the nineteenth century. This mix-up of terms is more than just curious; its incongruity points to a deep symbolic relationship between two paradigms of cultural difference that it seems useful to label “race” and “ethnicity,” respectively, in a reading of American culture.

The uncomfortable relationship between the two concepts has troubled scholarship of race and ethnicity as much as it did the receptionist; it faces a paradox that strongly resists the grip of systematic scholarly taxonomy, perhaps because it is in part a result of precisely such taxonomy. The concept of “race” draws much of its long-standing currency from its constant repetition and legitimization in scientific, legal, medical, and political discourses. “Ethnicity,” however, is conceptually much more unstable and has served either to supplant or to supplement “race,” depending on the political, disciplinary, and conceptual needs of its user. This book draws attention to how these two concepts can be useful in identifying cultural forces productive in American literature at a specific cultural moment.

Making the interrelation between race and ethnicity the focal point of a study of mid-nineteenth-century American literature is challenging because the distinct notions of race and ethnicity are among the key characteristics

that serve to mark the historical difference between antebellum and early twenty-first-century American culture. Not only is the word “race” much more mobile in its denotations in nineteenth-century texts than it is in contemporary usage, but the context of slavery and its rationalization in scientific racism—including the chromatic homogeneity it imposed upon national identifications—serves to define today’s identificatory urge toward polychromatic plurality. But this difference is deceptive. Genetic research and DNA testing have resurrected race as a biological category, even as it is strenuously maintained that as such it should not have social implications. The term “ethnicity,” moreover, originated in the scholarly desire to leave race and its linkage to slavery in the United States and fascism in Europe behind. It is my argument here that an awareness of precisely this discursive baggage and conceptual indeterminacy makes these two concepts powerful conduits for a reading of antebellum American literature situated in the twenty-first century. This study demonstrates how such a reading may identify a specific transnational urge in the very fabric of American literature as it pushes toward positioning itself as a national literature. This is to say that ethnicity as an analytical concept clearly distinct from race makes it possible to bring a transnational perspective to a reading of the literature that has been used to define America as a nation.

### Shades of White and Other Discursive Pitfalls

*[E]thnicity is a matter of social organization above and beyond questions of empirical cultural differences: it is about “the social organization of cultural difference.” (Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*)*

*Ethnicity as a tenuous ancestry and as the interplay of different ancestries may be the most crucial aspect of the American national character. (Werner Sollors, “The Roots of Ethnicity”)*

*The nineteenth century was obsessed with the idea that it was race which explained the character of peoples. (Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*)*

*During the nineteenth century, race-thinking emerged for the first time as a central current in Western thought. (George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*)*

What makes a reading enabled by ethnicity conceptually challenging is that ethnicity has become a confusing and volatile term in the study of American literature, history, society, and politics, productively crossing—and sometimes unproductively erasing—disciplinary boundaries. Its proliferating and often contradictory deployment undermines its immediate usefulness for a study of literature. To the degree that attempts and failures to define the term within the different disciplines concerned with American culture have multiplied, its power to facilitate a meaningful analysis in literary studies seems to diminish. At the same time, “ethnicity” as an analytical term swiftly moves in and out of vogue in scholarship concerned with alterity within American culture. As early as 1986, Werner Sollors moved “beyond ethnicity,” and in 1989, a panel of scholars asked themselves in his influential collection *The Invention of Ethnicity* whether the concept was obsolete. Almost twenty years later, Bluford Adams in a review article diagnosed that “scholarly interest in Euro-American ethnic groups is beginning to approach the levels of the ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s” (395). Furthermore, the concept is being used in scholarship and elsewhere, without much reflection, either as a synonym for or a companion to “race” with the tacit understanding that a definition would cause both to unravel at the seams. However, in spite of the criticism that these various uses of the concept have deservedly drawn, the debate around it has produced important new ways of looking at American culture and literary history, particularly in the twentieth century. It is this interpretive richness, and even its characteristic analytical fuzziness, that makes ethnicity not just a problematic word that tiptoes around race in twentieth-century scholarship and the media, but also a powerful term that enables a reading of nineteenth-century American literature that looks beyond Anglo-Saxon monoculturalism and the bipolarity of a slavery-based race system.

When the present study thus brings ethnicity to a reading of antebellum literature, the concern is not to distinguish “ethnic” writers from “non-ethnic” writers in American romanticism or to attempt a rewriting of the American Renaissance from the perspective of ethnicity. Rather, the object is to analyze textual qualities that contributed to the creation of ethnic selfhood and otherness as the United States formulated its national selfhood at large through an urgent yet always threatened push for its whiteness, particularly in contradistinction to Europe and Africa. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that both of these concepts as I use them emerged from the academic disciplines of ethnography and sociology and



have been theorized separately, against and with each other. Placing close readings of the texts in dialogue with current theories of literature and culture, I hope not only to develop a sharply contoured analysis of how mid-nineteenth-century texts generate cultural selfhood and alterity, but also to work out the relationship between American romanticism and its reception in present-day American studies and American culture.

This book is certainly not the first to test ethnicity as an analytical term for the study of pre-Civil War American literature. A notable example appears in a special issue of *American Literary History* edited by Sacvan Bercovich in 2003 that debates the editorial politics behind his *Cambridge History of American Literature*. The issue is divided in two sections, "Poetry" and "Ethnicity"—the two areas of literary studies that Bercovitch identifies as most problematic in assembling the *Cambridge History* (2). According to Eric Sundquist in the "Ethnicity" section of that same issue, the emergence of ethnicity as an idea is concurrent with the development of an American national literature; he points to the literature of exploration and empire, with *Moby-Dick* as its most prominent manifestation and example of the cultural productiveness of "ethnicity" in the nineteenth century ("In the Lion's Mouth" 35). This literary argument is a familiar one in the historical study of ethnicity: at the same time as the first massive waves of immigration hit the United States in the third decade of the nineteenth century, those who were already in the country were just gathering for the collective effort of creating a distinct national identity (see Conzen et al. 25).

However, different and quite contrasting periodizations of the "ethnic" in American literary and cultural history compete for validity among the disciplines that use the term. On the one hand, there is consensus that diversity—as ethnic diversity—was a defining feature of the American colonies from the beginning owing to Britain's refusal to finance and thus control American colonization (see Berkin 1). But, on the other hand, ethnicity is treated as a largely twentieth-century phenomenon, particularly in literary studies. Here ethnicity becomes a new valuation of hyphenated difference *within* American culture as the antithesis of the melting pot ideology and the racial binary that emerged from slavery. As Sundquist also points out, late nineteenth-century scientific and legal discourses produced a transformation in how ethnicity was conceptualized in the United States ("In the Lion's Mouth" 35).

To disentangle these conflicting chronologies, it seems useful at this point to distinguish 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. While these two do not exist independently from each other, to simply assume their identity blocks a nuanced reading of texts that were written before the term entered the English language. In contrast to “race,” the nineteenth century did not know the term “ethnicity” and thus could not easily accommodate and semantically constrain this particular type of cultural alterity within the confines of such a label. For example, Whitman’s “teeming nation of nations” in his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* takes cultural multiplicity as one of the core qualities of American national identity, prefiguring modern conceptualizations of diversity; but national origin is not simply synonymous with “ethnicity.” As Werner Sollors has pointed out, the term “ethnicity” was introduced by American social scientists in the 1940s as a replacement for the tainted and more limited noun “race” to supplement other categories of social differentiation such as class and sex and thus emerged from a modern and postmodern epistemological paradigm (see *Invention* xiii; “Foreword” x). Formulated in opposition to scientific racism and fascism, “ethnicity” was to provide a new beginning in sociology, a shedding of the conceptual legacy of the nineteenth century.

The late twentieth-century debate around the “invention of ethnicity” illustrates the usefulness of this distinction between term and concept. In “The Invention of Ethnicity in the United States,” Kathleen N. Conzen and colleagues contest Sollors’ conceptualization of the origin of ethnicity:

With Werner Sollors, we do not view ethnicity as primordial (ancient, unchanging, inherent in a group’s blood, soul, or misty past), but we differ from him in our understanding of ethnicity as a cultural construction accomplished over historical time. In our view, ethnicity is not a “collective fiction,” but rather a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories. That is, it is grounded in real life context and social experience. (4–5)

“Ethnicity” here is used as a word whose relationship to the social process it labels is taken for granted. But Sollors, when he speaks of “invention,” is more interested in how the term emerges in sociology than in how ethnicity as a concept shapes social interactions (see *Beyond Ethnicity*

21–24; *Invention* xiii; “Foreword” x). He thus aims to take into account not just the “social experience” of ethnicity but also the act of naming this experience as “ethnicity” in the mid- to late twentieth century, which sees it as an integral part of the cultural process it labels. Therefore, while Sollors is careful to locate the emergence of “ethnicity” in a modern and postmodern historical context, Conzen and colleagues transpose the term into the nineteenth century:

At the onset of mass immigration to the United States in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Americans themselves were engaged in a self-conscious project of inventing a national identity, and in the process found themselves also inventing the category of ethnicity—“nationality” was the term they actually used—to account for the culturally distinctive groups in their midst. (6)

Because Conzen and colleagues are interested in what they call “social experience,” it is heuristically legitimate to conflate nineteenth-century “nationality” and twentieth-century “ethnicity,” suggesting a continuity in the historical narrative of continual emergence, or “ethnogenesis,” which they also endorse. Based on this distinction, Sundquist’s reminder that ethnicity and American national identity are concurrent phenomena is clearly more akin to Conzen and colleagues’ notion of ethnicity as a social reality than to Sollors’ conceptualization of it as a term rooted in American sociology. Similarly, the vast majority of studies on ethnicity in American literature draw from the ethnic affiliation of the text’s author, as, for example, in Chicano/a literature, Jewish literature, Asian American literature, Native American literature, or German American literature. Since “ethnic” literature has primarily been identified with the literature of “ethnics,” that is, non-Anglo-Saxon groups in the United States, such transposition to the nineteenth century of a term invented in the twentieth is possible without meriting the charge of ahistorical imposition of contemporary meaning upon a historically remote text.

While Sollors ultimately retires the term “ethnicity” and replaces it with terms of kinship and cohesion, it remains a term that accurately describes a specifically American narrative conflict. This conflict emerges at a moment in the nineteenth century that is usually underrepresented in periodizations of “ethnicity” in American culture and is “specifically American” in a relational, transnational sense—not as being exceptional from but as being in relation to other nations. Thus, like Sollors, I see the

United States as a “polyethnic nation among polyethnic nations” (*Beyond Ethnicity* 260)—with an awareness that “ethnicity” itself is a culturally and historically specific term and that it originated in scholarship from an American context. “Ethnicity,” in this study, becomes productive both as a term that names a textual structure and as a way of looking at a text that focuses on its aesthetic—and erotic—qualities while at the same time being grounded in a political history of difference and identity.

Using this term analytically in a reading of nineteenth-century literature, however, requires some qualification and reconceptualization. Once “ethnicity” moves to the center as an analytical term rather than serving as a marker of identity, its theoretical grounding begins to shift. Since “ethnicity” did not exist as a term in the nineteenth century, simply labeling cultural constellations “ethnic” that today would be considered as such brings the text into a jarring tension between the current moment of reading and its own historical grounding. The readings in this study are an attempt to make this tension productive.

The study of ethnicity has always privileged the plurality of experience and identity over binary opposition and has from its beginning been shaped by the cultural relativism of early twentieth-century anthropology following the work of Franz Boas. However, because “ethnicity” has developed in tension with “race” and itself carries an etymology that points to a process of othering, the term is always also a reminder of the racial binary that excludes the other from the self. It is my argument here that its *foreignness* to predominant nineteenth-century notions of difference is precisely what makes “ethnicity” a useful term in addressing this difference in nineteenth-century writing. “Ethnicity” here does not simply supersede “race” or serve as a less troublesome synonym but becomes a conceptual angle of vision thoroughly in relation with and dependent upon “race.”

The terms of the debate concerning “race” in the mid-nineteenth century have surprising currency in the early twenty-first century. From the “new white nationalism” of journals such as the *American Renaissance*, a monthly publication devoted to promoting the ideas of white supremacy and anti-immigration, to the “new abolitionism” of the radically anti-racist journal *Race Traitor*, the current debate around race, particularly from a “white” perspective, revisits core discursive sites of the antebellum period. The editor of *American Renaissance*, Jared Taylor, for example, invokes statements of the early Abraham Lincoln arguing for racial hierarchy (“Hollow Debate”) to justify his argument for racial separation and renewed

nativism.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the radically anti-racist left also turns to the nineteenth century in search of genuinely American discursive traditions to overcome the national sin of racism, as in this programmatic statement by Noel Ignatiev: “Under these circumstances, when inherited ‘left’ wisdom is revealed as not merely inadequate but a barrier to accomplishing the tasks before us, we have turned to the most radical of all indigenous American traditions—that of John Brown and the 19th-century abolitionists” (2).<sup>2</sup>

Any discussion of race in nineteenth-century American literature has to work around this conceptual legacy. In a paper presented at the 2004 meeting of the American Studies Association, historian of racial theories Bruce Dain, building on his work in *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, argued that what has been identified as a transition between Enlightenment “environmentalist” notions of racial difference and “modern racism” in the nineteenth century is actually a much less clear-cut interplay between conflicting racial paradigms (“Was There a Transition?”). In readings of antebellum literature, it is precisely this interplay that makes sorting out race a difficult, if not impossible, task, especially since our current investment in race obscures the historically specific paradigms that shaped racist thinking in antebellum times. The discursive operations of race are complex in the mid-1850s, when pre-Darwinist racial theories were developed to justify racialized slavery and competed aggressively with earlier scientific and biblical notions of human difference in eighteenth-century natural history.

At the same time, one might indeed argue that twenty-first-century Western cultures are still so invested in racial differences in some way connected to those very same racial theories that we can work with them analytically only in a preliminary and tentative way. There are, for example,

<sup>1</sup> The parallels to nineteenth-century racial thinking go even further. In response to Hurricane Katrina, Taylor pronounced: “To be sure, the story of Hurricane Katrina does have a moral for anyone not deliberately blind. The races are different. Blacks and whites are different. When blacks are left entirely to their own devices, Western Civilization—any kind of civilization—disappears. And in a crisis, civilization disappears overnight” (“Africa in Our Midst”).

<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting a relationship between the racism of the fringe right and the anti-racism of the new abolitionism other than that they both reference the nineteenth-century debate. Noel Ignatiev, who is on the editorial board of *Race Traitor*, is a respected scholar of race in the nineteenth century whose book *How the Irish Became White* (1995) has made an important contribution to understanding how the opposition between “black” and “white” emerged in the first place.

deeper correlations between nineteenth-century scientific race theories and their twenty-first-century equivalents than one would like to acknowledge. Working on this question from a biomedical and disease-prevention perspective, the area in which the physical reality of race is currently making a comeback, Lundy Braun has demonstrated that the assumption that observed differences are genetic rather than cultural leads to biased research in medical and particularly biomedical discourse on racial and ethnic difference (159). There are two options: either to throw out “race” altogether, which seems counterintuitive, or to accept the problems it brings to the analysis and reconceptualize it in heuristic terms that make it useful for a reading without fixing it within any closed definitional bounds.

A number of major recent studies have thoroughly documented the intellectual history of race in the nineteenth century, working with and against groundbreaking studies that grew out of the civil rights era. The earlier studies, Thomas F. Gossett’s *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (1963)<sup>3</sup> and George M. Fredrickson’s *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971), in particular, trace the joint development of race and racism through scientific race theory (particularly in ethnography) and its immediate relationship to the apology for slavery as part of the intensifying antislavery debate. Fredrickson shows how racism as “rationalized pseudoscientific theory positing the innate and permanent inferiority of nonwhites” (xi) developed in the nineteenth century. While there is merit in defining race, as Fredrickson does, as the kind of difference generated by scientific racism, this degrades the rich tradition of African-American thinking about race to the status of mere reaction. More recent studies, such as Mia Bay’s *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830–1925* and Bruce Dain’s *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic*, have questioned this one-sided perspective that seeks the origin of “race” in expressions of “white” thought and demonstrated that race theory was shaped in a cross-racial process that defies the ascription of a clearly reactive structure to the argument.

In the nineteenth century, the question of racial difference was intimately tied to the search for human origins beyond the biblical narrative. This search was clearly rooted in the Enlightenment obsession with taxonomy. According to Bay, the “environmentalist theory of human differences was

<sup>3</sup> This book was republished in a new edition in 1993—a tribute to its continued importance and relevance. The new edition includes a foreword by Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Arnold Rampersad, as well as a new preface by the author.

the first truly racial conception of mankind insofar as it set out to explain race as a fundamental and important distinction between human beings” (19). This meant that black people could be and were conceptualized as inferior, but it was a theory that assumed that all humans were essentially the same based on their common origin. Bay also points out that such environmentalist conceptions of race allowed blacks and whites to argue against slavery in the United States. The mid-nineteenth century is an important point in time here: environmentalism—the idea that racial characteristics, including skin color, are the result of external factors such as climate and culture—declined after 1840, while the emerging scientific racism at the time resulted in a biracialism that pitted black against white (Fredrickson 2, 101). However, as Bruce Dain has pointed out, it would be reductive to continue to claim that nineteenth-century scientific racism effected a complete paradigm shift from environmentalism to organicism in scientific and popular race theory (see *A Hideous Monster of the Mind* 216; “Was There a Transition?”).

Inasmuch as paradigm shifts are never clear-cut, Dain’s reminder is certainly valuable. However, it is equally important to see that these racializations of human difference, in opposing eighteenth-century notions of monogenesis and environmentalism, necessarily also engendered another, contrapuntal paradigm that absorbed the notion of national affiliation, which scientific racism, in focusing on the body as a marker of difference, had expelled. It is useful to discuss this equally powerful paradigm in terms of “ethnicity,” even if it was not labeled as such at the time. Thus defined in the American context as potentially reduplicated nationality, ethnicity both rests on and undermines the concept of nation.

If mid-nineteenth-century ethnography racialized certain human differences, others must also have emerged fundamentally altered. If skin color and cranial measurements become the markers of different human species, then what remains as “cultural” or “national” specificity takes on an entirely different function. In fact, only when race became systematized as a pivot for the slavery debate could ethnicity emerge as a separate and culturally meaningful category. Africa as an imaginary space, often symbolically represented by Egypt and Ethiopia, plays an important part in defining blackness and whiteness and becomes one of the touchstones that separate the paradigm of race from that of ethnicity in the mid-nineteenth century. It is important to see that even in its most severely scientific manifestations, race never attained the clarity and conceptual purity for which the scientific

texts that attempted to define it strove with deadly urgency. However, the nineteenth century did succeed in eliminating certain meanings from the notion of race, displacing them to a different conceptual space. In the twentieth century, “ethnicity” would become a label for that space. The meanings that were eliminated were ones that linked to cultural practices rather than physical attributes.

The concept of race is thus fraught with paradox: on the one hand, it has become productive in the history of resistance to racism; on the other hand, it still carries the weight of nineteenth-century ethnographic discourses that supported slavery and brought new epistemological power to racism. As a theoretical concept, by contrast, ethnicity is a product of twentieth-century sociology and cultural anthropology and organizes difference on the basis of travel, migration, and cultural encounter, including violent conflict among culturally distinct groups, exile, and diaspora.<sup>4</sup> These definitions are clearly both culturally and historically specific. I make no claims for a universal definition of either race or ethnicity that would be applicable across cultures, time, and disciplinary boundaries. Such a definition would inevitably do violence to the literary texts that are at the center of this study.

### Beyond Immigration

While I think it is helpful to identify the discursive origin and trajectory of each of the two concepts, it is also necessary to acknowledge the ways in which the two concepts have intersected—have been conflated as well as opposed. Stuart Hall is reported to have quipped, “[R]ace and ethnicity play hide-and-seek with each other” (Sollors, “Foreword” xxxv). Indeed, because of their different disciplinary and theoretical origins and trajectories and their centrality to the definition of cultural identity, race and ethnicity are both discursively incompatible and at the same time indispensable to each other.

<sup>4</sup> Some authors distinguish between ethnic and racial identity on the basis of who is the agent of signification. For example, in her study of black sexual politics, Patricia Hill Collins sets self-assigned ethnicity apart from race as assigned by others (17). Such a distinction requires assuming that individual agents control meaning, which may be heuristically useful in certain contexts but is impossible to maintain in literary studies; in this case, both race and ethnicity are best seen as inscribed in a polyphonous process in which there is no stable center of meaning.



In scholarship that brings race and ethnicity in contact, from multicultural studies to critical whiteness studies and transnational studies, this relationship is uneasy at best and evades definitional closure. The important and influential collection by Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (2000), testifies to this uneasiness: while the volume productively engages the paradox of redefining the study of U.S. literature as an emphatically transnational enterprise and, importantly, juxtaposes race and ethnicity as separate yet equivalent terms in the subtitle, the introduction sometimes treats race as a subset of ethnicity, as in “U.S. ethnic studies” (xi), and sometimes as a distinct though related concept, as in “race/ethnicity studies” (xi). Multicultural studies shares a similarly troubled relationship to the tensions and intersections between race and ethnicity. In his groundbreaking historiographical study *A Different Mirror* (1993), Ronald Takaki points out that “[c]ontrary to the notions of scholars like Nathan Glazer and Thomas Sowell, ‘race’ in America has not been the same as ethnicity” (10), but tacitly takes the meanings of “race” and “ethnicity” to be self-evident. Timothy B. Powell’s *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (2000), an excellent historicized study and important starting point for my work, remains similarly open as to what “race” and “ethnicity” signify in the context of his readings. The only common denominator that emerges from these and other studies is that “ethnicity” tends to refer to those migrants to the United States who have come to be legally and symbolically subsumed under the umbrella term “white,” whereas “race” tends to refer to binary relationships between “white” and “non-white.” Such usage of “ethnicity” not only demonstrates, as Jacobson argues, the term’s inadequacy for looking at American history (9), but also participates in the forces that pit the white against the racial other. My purpose here is not to fault these studies for their definitional trouble with race and ethnicity, but to reconceptualize these terms to make them useful channels for a dialogical reading of American romanticism.

While the term “ethnicity” seemed to offer a liberation from “race” in the mid-twentieth century, by the late 1980s it had come under pressure from proponents of taking a sharp, clear look at the very real social inequalities that “race” seemed to afford and “ethnicity” to obfuscate. For example, the sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1986; 2nd ed., 1994) sharply criticize the “ethnicity paradigm” in sociology for its tendency

to conflate the history of slavery and subsequent systematic oppression of black people in the United States with the history of immigration and the situation of European immigrants (16, 20). In *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), Matthew Frye Jacobson, historian of European immigration in the nineteenth century, follows Omi and Winant's critique of the facile extension of ethnicity over all types of cultural difference, but from a radically different perspective. Jacobson argues that in the nineteenth century, the color line was not only, as Omi and Winant assert was the case in the twentieth century, drawn around European immigrants, but also divided European immigrants from each other (7). To Jacobson, race is as central to the history of immigration as to all other aspects of American history, and he rightly identifies a filter in late twentieth-century historical scholarship that binarizes race, ahistorically projecting a contemporary idea of relatively homogenous "whiteness" onto an earlier time that drew very different boundaries. To Jacobson, the idea of cultural rather than biological difference was born in the mid-twentieth century:

American scholarship on immigration has generally conflated race and color, and so has transported a late-twentieth-century understanding of "difference" into a period whose inhabitants recognized biologically based "races" rather than culturally based "ethnicities." But in the interest of an accurate historical rendering of race in the structure of U.S. culture and in the experience of those immigrant groups now called "Caucasians," we must listen more carefully to the historical sources than to the conventions of our own era; we must admit of a system of "difference" by which one might be both white and racially distinct from other whites. (6)

Jacobson thus emphasizes the importance of race for the history of immigration in the United States and demands that, particularly for the nineteenth century, scholars need to look beyond a color-coded concept of race. In other words, they need to move beyond Blumenbach's still current racial "pentagon" (David Hollinger's term) of black, white, red, yellow, and brown to see that groups that became "white" after 1924 had been racialized as non-white in the early to mid-nineteenth century. And indeed, such carefulness is crucial. Yet it is also important to see—and my reading of mid-nineteenth-century texts confirms this—that the racial binary was without doubt a powerful force in the antebellum United States. Indeed, race had a very different weight in a phrase such as "the Irish race" or

“the French race” than it did in “the Negro race.” Collocation here makes a world of a difference.

It is the aim of *With a Barbarous Din* to examine this difference from the perspective of literary studies and on the basis of close readings that focus on the mid-nineteenth century as a cultural moment crucial for the formation of race and ethnicity. From this perspective it is important to see that the opposition between “culture” and “biology” or “physiognomy” as lines of demarcation may not be the most useful way to distinguish “ethnicity” from “race.” There are several competing paradigms of difference at work in antebellum (i.e., pre-Darwinian as well) discussions of human difference. These paradigms originate in and are tied to different though related political tensions at the time: nativism, territorial expansion, and slavery, all of which were strongly inflected by the ethnographic debate that produced scientific racism. Of these, racial bipolarity pits white against black and is directly related to the racism generated by the slavery debate in journalism, politics, ethnography, and literature. This paradigm reduces all differences to the stark clarity of black and white.

The second, scientific paradigm, which introduces the Linnaean method of classification to the differences among humans, is best visualized by

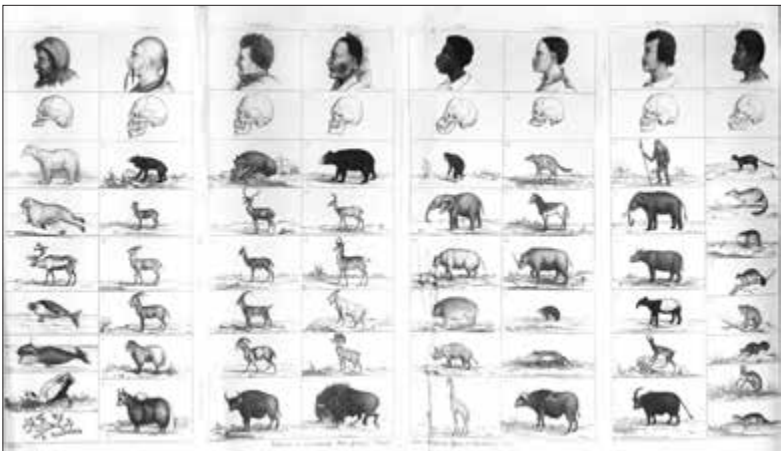


Figure 1: Louis Agassiz' "Tableau" from his "Sketch of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and Their Relation to the Different Types of Man." in *Types of Mankind* (lxxvi).

Louis Agassiz' influential taxonomy of races (Figure 1) in his "Sketch of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and Their Relation to the Different Types of Man," published in *Types of Mankind* in 1854. In direct analogy to distinctions between animals, Agassiz divided the human "races" into eight different "species," which he argued were as distinct from each other as the horse and the ass (lxxiii). Agassiz' table also demonstrates that the acknowledgment of biological diversity and the scientific desire for comprehensive categorization could coexist in one text, with the racial bipolarity grounded in slavery. *Types of Mankind*, one of the major statements of nineteenth-century ethnography, clearly frames the cultural diversity present in the United States at the time in terms of a clear racial taxonomy that pushes "race" to mean "species." However, other racial paradigms interfere with this purportedly scientific project of categorization, and even in the context of categorization of multiple "races," the black/white binary as a shaping force in American culture at the time is the overriding organizational paradigm of *Types of Mankind* as a whole.

Beginning with the significance of ethnography to contemporary politics, the introduction to *Types of Mankind* relates an incident involving the staunchly pro-slavery politician John C. Calhoun, confirming that the legitimacy of slavery is at the heart of the volume's search for human diversity:

A correspondence ensued between Mr. Calhoun and Dr. Morton on the subject, and the Doctor presented to him copies of the *Crania Americana* and *Ægyptiaca*, together with minor works, all of which Mr. Calhoun studied with no less pleasure than profit. He soon perceived that the conclusions which he had long before drawn from history, and from his personal observations in America, on the Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Teutonic, French, Spanish, Negro, and Indian races, were entirely corroborated by the plain teachings of modern science. He beheld demonstrated in Morton's works the important fact, that the Egyptian, Negro, several White, and sundry Yellow races, had existed, in their present forms, for at least 4000 years; and that it behoved the statesman to lay aside all current speculations about the origin and perfectibility of races, and to deal, in political argument, with the simple facts as they stand. (51)

Here, the different racial paradigms unsystematically flow into each other to confirm the American racial binary, in which "Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Teutonic, French and Spanish" constitute "several White . . . races" as immutable from the beginning of human history as the "Negro" who, also an integral part of this vision of American society, served as a slave. At the

same time, as Jacobson has ably shown, this unsystematic and unabashedly contradictory model of “race” allowed new immigrants to be assigned various degrees of “swarthinness” distinct from the sole lily-white Anglo-Saxon. Similarly, depending on the region, American Indians, Mexicans, and Irish, Italian, German, and Chinese immigrants could be singled out for the absolute inferiority check against the Anglo-Saxon. Jacobson demonstrates clearly the development and heterogeneity of whiteness beginning with the naturalization law in 1790 up to the civil rights era. He rightly criticizes scholars for not looking more closely at the word “race” as it was used in the nineteenth century and asserts: “Tacitly assuming that ‘race’ did not mean ‘race’—that Hebrews, Celts, Mediterraneans, Iberics, or Teutons were really Caucasians—is worse than merely underestimating the ideological power of racism: it is surrendering to that power” (6). However, as even a cursory reading of *Types of Mankind* indicates and as my readings of literary texts more forcefully confirm, it is crucial to also acknowledge the presence of competing racial paradigms that shaped American culture in the nineteenth century, paradigms that were less malleable than the one that enabled racial divisions among European immigrants. Ultimately, all racial differentiations seem to fall back on a binary opposition; slavery made the distinction between “Caucasian” and “Negro” the highest priority for proponents of slavery in ethnography as well as in journalism, but the distinction with respect to Mexicans or Chinese contract laborers in California could assume similar structural force, as my final chapter will show.

Nevertheless, these “racial” paradigms—dual or pentagonal—ultimately cannot account for how cultural alterity operated in texts at the time. If one follows Jacobson in his critique that projecting the twentieth-century sociological term “ethnicity” back to the nineteenth century is grossly ahistorical, which I do, there are basically two options for scholarship: either to work with “race” rather than “ethnicity” to analyze operations of difference in the nineteenth century, which is what Jacobson himself chooses, or instead to see what interpretive potential may lie in ahistoricity. The present study takes the latter path.