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 0521831148 - The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century
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 John D. Kerkering
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Introduction: the poetics of identity

I have wanted always to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black. I don't have the resources of a musician but I thought that if it was truly black literature, it would not be black because I was, it would not even be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together – the sentences, the structure, texture and tone – so that anyone who read it would realize. I use the analogy of the music because you can range all over the world and it's still black . . . I don't imitate it, but I am informed by it. Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I've appropriated it. I've tried to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing. . . .

– Toni Morrison¹

I had an instinct that [the invitation to translate *Beowulf*] should not be let go. An understanding I had worked out for myself concerning my own linguistic and literary origins made me reluctant to abandon the task. I had noticed, for example, that without any conscious intent on my part certain lines in the first poem in my first book conformed to the requirements of Anglo-Saxon metrics. These lines were made up of two balancing halves, each half containing two stressed syllables – “The spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father digging. I look down . . .” – and in the case of the second line there was alliteration linking “digging” and “down” across the caesura. Part of me, in other words, had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start.

– Seamus Heaney²

The two passages quoted above exemplify this book's central concern, the work of writers who employ formal literary effects in order to establish the identity of a people. When Toni Morrison speaks of “a way of writing” that is “irrevocably black” and Seamus Heaney describes himself as “writing Anglo-Saxon,” they each link their writing to a particular people, the “black” and “Anglo-Saxon” races. In these examples, what determines the race of the writing is not, as one might expect, the race of the writer or

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even the writing's race-specific themes. Morrison, for instance, hopes that her writing will be black "not . . . because I was" and "not even . . . because of its subject matter," and Heaney asserts that, "without any conscious intent," he was "writing Anglo-Saxon from the start." What ultimately makes writing racial, for both Morrison and Heaney, is the presence within it of certain race-specific effects. Morrison concerns herself with music, seeking "to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing," and Heaney finds evidence of race in his writing's "Anglo-Saxon metrics," specifically its "stressed syllables" and "alliteration." These alliterative stresses, as Heaney interprets them, do not reinforce the line's meaning – for instance, by reproducing the sounds and rhythms associated with the action of digging – but rather testify to the racial identity of the line itself. Similarly, Morrison seeks a style of writing whose "texture and tone" convey not sense but race. For both of these writers, then, the racial identity of certain literary effects is responsible for conferring racial identity on a larger piece of writing. The common language in which Morrison and Heaney each write – English – can in this way be assigned distinct racial identities as "black" or "Anglo-Saxon."

Even as Morrison and Heaney advance this account of their writing, they offer what seems to be a different account of themselves, linking their own group identities not to literary effects but to the circumstances and choices that led each of them to affiliate with a group. Morrison, for instance, was born into a family subject to the racism endemic to American society, and she has chosen to continue her solidarity with those who, like her, have been marginalized due to their color.³ Heaney was born into a Catholic family, part of a minority long subject to discrimination in the North of Ireland, and has persisted with this affiliation as his own group identity.⁴ And to a certain extent both Morrison and Heaney see their personal environments and the decisions they have made as explanations not only of their group affiliations but also of their writing styles. Morrison, for instance, acknowledges debts to a variety of influences, particularly James Baldwin: "I had been thinking his thoughts for so long I thought they were mine. . . . He gave me a language to dwell in" ("Living Memory," 180). Heaney, for his part, asserts that "poets' biographies are present in the sounds they make" ("Introduction," xxiii–xxiv), and the biographical influence present in his own work, he observes, is the alliterative verse of Gerard Manley Hopkins (xxiii). Yet even as they each tie their work to the environments they have known and the choices they have made, they also, as we've seen, characterize their writing in terms that subordinate authorial biographies to racial categories – describing it as either "black" or "Anglo-Saxon." Whatever Morrison may have learned from predecessors like Baldwin, the writing to which she aspires would not

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be irrevocably Baldwinian but instead, as she says of music, “irrevocably black.” And however Heaney’s ear may have been shaped by Hopkins, he finally chooses to describe his own early metrics as “Anglo-Saxon” – and not Hopkinsian – “from the start.”

By characterizing their work in these terms, as “black” or “Anglo-Saxon,” Morrison and Heaney each participate in a pattern of thinking that links writing to a people (“blacks” or “Anglo-Saxons”) by first locating in that writing a people’s distinctive literary effects (the “texture” of “blues” and “spirituals” or “stressed syllables” and “alliteration”). This pattern of thinking is not unique to these two Nobel laureates, for it has also figured prominently in the work of many literary critics. A point similar to Morrison’s, for instance, has been advanced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who argues that “Blackness exists, but only as a function of its signifiers”; with the signifiers of dialect, for instance, there is “a musicality inherent in the form itself,” a musicality Gates links with “black speech and black music (especially the spirituals).”⁵ Gates’s concern here is consistent with the work of Houston Baker, who argues of W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* that “Du Bois . . . transmutes his text into the FOLK’s singing . . . offer[ing] a singing book” in which the “spirituals . . . [are] masterful repositories of African cultural spirit.”⁶ According to Baker, then, Du Bois effectively achieves what Morrison identified as her own goal, producing text informed by black music. Just as these critics have supported Morrison’s project of making blackness “intrinsic” to writing, other critics have endorsed Heaney’s account of writing that is racially “Anglo-Saxon.” For instance Ted Hughes, to whose memory Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* is dedicated, has argued that “the tradition inherent in the natural sprung rhythms of English speech” is “the music of *Gawain’s* . . . meter” – the meter of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a work whose meter is based on a “two-part, alliterative accentual line.”⁷ Hughes here repeats a view prominent in Anglo-American criticism since Northrop Frye’s influential assertion that “A four-stress line seems to be inherent in the structure of the English language,” a structure dating back to “Old English.”⁸ An even earlier example of this analysis appears in a recently reprinted essay by Sculley Bradley, who suggests that when Walt Whitman abandoned “syllable-counting in his lines” he replaced it with a “rhythmical principle. . . rooted in the very nature of English speech . . . since the Old English period,” a rhythmical principle Bradley describes as “the most primitive and persistent characteristic of English poetic rhythm” and associates with a typical line from *Beowulf*.⁹ These critical accounts suggest that Morrison and Heaney have internalized, and practice upon their own works, a mode of criticism more

broadly available in contemporary literary culture: a race is asserted to be inherent in a formal effect, which is itself embedded within a piece of writing, making race itself intrinsic to that writing.

It is this shared understanding of how texts embody a people – by incorporating the formal effects specific to that people – that will be my focus in this book. In the chapters that follow I will argue that the account of texts presented here by Morrison and Heaney, and supported by these literary critics, has a history dating back to the early nineteenth century. During this period formal literary effects contributed to the efforts of many writers who sought to establish the collective identity of a people. In the early part of the nineteenth century, I will show, formal effects of literary texts were used to assert the collective identities of nations, including Scotland and the Southern Confederacy. In the latter half of the century writers continued their focus on formal effects but shifted their concern from national to racial peoples, specifically “Negroes” and “Anglo-Saxons,” the races that would later, as we’ve seen, be the concern of Morrison and Heaney. As these examples from Morrison and Heaney suggest, my concern with formal effects will lead me to address a variety of writings beyond poems, writings that will include fictional as well as non-fictional prose texts, some of which will discuss these formal effects and others of which will employ them. Across these varying textual sources I will demonstrate a persistent pattern of thinking to be at work: like their present-day successors, nineteenth-century writers use formal literary effects as a vehicle for establishing the existence of distinct peoples, first nations and then races. This pattern of thinking about literary effects is shared, moreover, among a variety of writers who – like Morrison and Heaney – do not consider themselves to be part of the same “people.” Yet the same basic premises are involved whether the people in question is “black” or “Anglo-Saxon,” or even when that people is not a race at all but instead – as I will show – a nation. So when Morrison and Heaney use poetic effects to demonstrate the autonomy of a people, the two of them are ultimately thinking alike, drawing upon a pattern of thinking generally available not just to them but also to earlier writers like Walter Scott and William Gilmore Simms, writers who employed it to imagine national rather than racial identity.

NATION AND RACE

By associating national and racial identity in this sequential manner, with national identities of the early nineteenth century succeeded by racial identities in the late nineteenth century, I treat these two categories of

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identity in a way that differs significantly from other recent discussions. First, unlike those critics who assign each form of identity a discrete history,¹⁰ I associate these two categories of identity as linked elements within a continuous historical narrative. And in the account I present, national and racial identity are linked in a different manner than has been suggested by still other critics, who link them as contemporary and antagonistic concepts.¹¹ Instead, in the account I present, national and racial identity are sequential and compatible notions – national identity is succeeded by racial identity, both of which are organized according to a common pattern of thinking. Thus unlike these existing critical accounts, this book's analysis will demonstrate national and racial identity to be linked in historical sequence with early nineteenth-century national identities succeeded by late nineteenth-century racial identities.

By way of contrast to my argument, consider Benedict Anderson's recent analysis, in which he presents racial identity as national identity's successor but sees it as logically *incompatible* with its predecessor.¹² Beginning with what he calls "nineteenth-century nationalist projects" (319), Anderson argues that the commitments central to this "age of classical nationalism" (325) have been undercut by "the 'ethnicization' process" (326).¹³ This process "draw[s] a sharp line between the political nation and a putative original ethnos" (326), ultimately leading to a "transnational ethnicity" (325) that, for Anderson, is synonymous with racial identity.¹⁴ According to Anderson, drawing such a line – dividing nations along racial or ethnic lines and thereby "unraveling the classical nineteenth-century nationalist project" (324) – is a recent impulse that stems from the "effects of post-industrial capitalism" (322). For Anderson, then, the "putative original ethnos" is a relatively new development that provides an alternative to classical nationalism. In contrast, I will argue that this "ethnos" is neither new nor, strictly speaking, an alternative to national identity. Instead of viewing it as new, I will argue that this "putative original ethnos" is not only a post-industrial concern but was also an early nineteenth-century concern, a concern advanced by writers like Walter Scott and William Gilmore Simms. Scott and Simms each sought to conceptualize a "people" in terms of just such a "putative original ethnos," and they did so, I will show, by arguing that the original ethnos of the people could be located within formal effects. What is more, Scott and Simms described these peoples not as ethnicities or races but as "nations" – the nations of Scotland (for Scott) and the Southern Confederacy (for Simms). During the nineteenth century, then, this account of nation – the one that locates a putative original ethnos in literary effects – coexisted with the very different classical nationalism that

is Anderson's focus, the imagined communities of print-capitalism. The difference between these two accounts of nation was apparent, we will see, in conflicts that Anderson does not examine, conflicts pitting Scott's Scottish nation against the British Union and Simms's Confederate nation against the United States Union.¹⁵ In these nineteenth-century conflicts between differing accounts of nation – between the nations of literary effects and the nations of Anderson's classical nationalism – we see a much earlier version of the more recent conflict Anderson observes, the conflict between classical nationalism and “ethnicity” (which, again, he equates with racial identity). Once these more recent “ethnicities” or races are likewise understood in terms of poetic effects – as they are in the above passages from Morrison and Heaney – we can then align them with the earlier nations of Scott and Simms. What this alignment suggests is that the “peoples” posing a challenge to Anderson's classical nationalism are not just a recent phenomenon but are in fact part of a longer history: both nineteenth-century nations (as formulated by Scott and Simms) and the more recent “ethnicities” or races (as formulated by Morrison and Heaney) have relied on literary effects in order to assert an identity that is distinct from Anderson's classical nation. Once we identify the consistent pattern of thinking aligning these earlier accounts of national identity with more recent accounts of racial identity, we can see more clearly my literary-historical point: national and racial peoples are linked by a history not of competition but of continuity, a continuity rooted in a shared commitment to treating literary effects as a basis for collective identity, whether national or racial.

In presenting this analysis of national and racial identity, I am advancing an account that is related – both conceptually and historically – to the argument that Walter Benn Michaels has recently advanced regarding a different pair of identity categories, racial and cultural identity. Arguing that a crucial achievement of “the great American modernist texts of the ‘20s. . . . was the perfection . . . of what would come to be called cultural identity,” Michaels asserts that this notion of cultural identity was inseparable from a prior notion of racial identity: “Culture, put forward as a way of preserving the primacy of identity while avoiding the embarrassments of blood, would turn out to be . . . a way of reconceptualizing and thereby preserving the essential contours of racial identity.”¹⁶ If, for Michaels, “the essential contours of racial identity” are preserved in a later account of cultural identity, in the account I propose the essential contours – what I am calling a pattern of thinking – behind national identity are preserved in a later account of racial identity. Thus like Michaels, I am arguing that the essential contours of an earlier account of identity (national identity) persist within a later,

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seemingly different account of identity (racial identity). But in addition to sharing this conceptual structure with Michaels's argument, my argument is also linked to his argument historically, as its chronological predecessor: the point of departure in Michaels's argument, racial identity, is my argument's destination. By placing my earlier historical account alongside his later one I propose an even longer narrative scope reaching back to the nineteenth century: Michaels's notion of cultural identity can be traced back not only, as he argues, to earlier accounts racial identity but also, I am arguing, through those earlier accounts of racial identity to even earlier nineteenth-century accounts of national identity. Or, to run the chronology forward, this book argues that early nineteenth-century accounts of national identity have persisted through accounts of racial identity to provide a basis for the still later pattern of thinking that Michaels calls cultural identity. The ongoing commitment to the notion of cultural identity is evident in the above passages from Morrison and Heaney, and their views, I am arguing, have conceptual antecedents in the works of the nineteenth-century writers featured in this book. To the extent that Morrison and Heaney are asserting "Black" and "Anglo-Saxon" as cultural rather than racial identities, they demonstrate Michaels's point, the effort to replace racial identities with cultural identities; but to the extent that they advance these accounts of identity by reference to formal textual effects, they participate in this earlier, nineteenth-century pattern of thinking, a pattern I will trace to the efforts of early nineteenth-century writers to conceptualize national identities.

But as this statement suggests, in order to extend Michaels's argument in this way – in order to trace contemporary accounts of cultural identity back not only to earlier accounts of racial identity but even further back to still earlier accounts of national identity – I must also diverge from that argument in a key respect: while Michaels argues that the link between racial and cultural identity is a shared commitment to identity inhering in bodies, and thus a shared commitment to racial biology (even as proponents of the latter, cultural identity, strive to deny that commitment), I am arguing that what links these accounts of identity – national, racial, and, ultimately, cultural – is a commitment not to racial biology but to identity inhering in formal literary effects. Thus while I acknowledge that many of the writers I address were convinced of the notion that racial identity inheres in bodies, I will argue that they made sense of this notion not through any knowledge or study of biology but rather by imagining the body (whose biology they understood rather poorly) as analogous to literary works (whose textuality they had, as we shall see, quite elaborately

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theorized). These writers, then, were drawing upon an existing account of literary texts – an account that racialized the formal features of those texts – in order to ground their quite speculative account of racial bodies. For these writers, bodies could be racialized insofar as texts were anthropomorphized and corporealized; put another way, bodies were examined not as objects of biological knowledge but as extensions of textual knowledge, and were thus treated as screens upon which an existing understanding of literary texts was heuristically and opportunistically projected. Once we see that this commitment to racial bodies was not only a flawed account of biology but was also a displaced understanding of textuality, we can see that this commitment to racial bodies has antecedents in prior discussions of textuality and identity, discussions I trace to earlier nineteenth-century writers who were committed to the concept of national identity. It is not enough, then, to describe the commitment to racial biology (as Michaels does) as a “mistake”¹⁷ (which it most certainly was), for it is a mistake with a literary history, a mistake that arose from an ultimately misguided (and some might argue disastrous) effort to think about bodies by analogy to literary texts. So for the writers I address, who thought carefully (and quite erroneously) about the racial body, their commitment to thinking of the body in terms of racial biology was ultimately a displaced version of a commitment they already held regarding literary texts: the race in the “blood” of bodies was for them an analogical extension of the race in the formal effects of texts.

By proceeding in this manner, transferring to persons their understanding of texts and textual effects, nineteenth-century writers confirmed Allen Grossman’s assertion of the close association between persons and poems: “Discourse about poetry,” Grossman has observed, “is displaced discourse about persons.”¹⁸ Recasting Grossman’s statement, I will argue that, for the nineteenth-century writers featured in this book, discourse about persons is displaced discourse about poetry. That is, having established an account of collective identity that was rooted in texts, nineteenth-century writers would then displace that textual account onto persons, using it as a conceptual template to guide their emerging efforts to imagine collective identity in those persons. Walter Scott, for instance, experiments with an allegorical form of this displacement, imagining that the Scottish national meter embedded within an English language poem corresponds to Scottish national habits embedded within an English-speaking subject. In the later work of William Gilmore Simms the literary effect of a Confederate people – the *genius loci* – remains tied to the landscape, so instead of imagining bodies as a version of this landscape, Simms imagines the landscape itself as a body, figuring the Appalachian Mountains – with their many instances of the *genius loci* – as the “backbone” of his southern nation, “Apalachia.” A still

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later writer like W.E.B. Du Bois, however, will move in the other direction, imagining that the southern *genius loci* of particular concern to him, the “Sorrow Songs” of the slaves, is contained not only by the boundaries of a corporealized landscape (as in Simms) but also within the body itself, as one aspect of what he calls “double consciousness.” Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, I will argue, exemplifies an increasingly prominent manner of displacing discourse about poetry onto persons: formal effects confer racial identity not only upon the texts and landscapes that contain them but also upon the persons who produce them. According to this displacement, the bodily production of these formal effects is increasingly understood as a symptom of that body’s racial “instincts” and thus as a disclosure of that body’s racial “blood.” Once textualized in this manner, bodies could at least seem to operate in the same manner as texts, and thus the persons associated with these formal effects could, like the writings in which these effects appeared, be assigned a racial identity. Rooted in a prior understanding of texts, this account of the racial identities of persons’ bodies reveals conceptual antecedents in prior accounts of literature, giving corporeal accounts of racial identity a nineteenth-century literary history.

By characterizing this account of racial identity as a displacement from texts to bodies I make it possible to advance two separate points. The first is the logical point that that, as Walter Benn Michaels argues, a commitment to racial identities entails a mistaken commitment to racial biology; the second is the historical point that a commitment to racial identities constitutes an extension to bodies of what had been a textual account of identity. Understood as a projection of textual thinking upon bodies, this notion of racial identity does not become any less a mistake about biology since, as we now know, biological processes ultimately operate in a manner quite different from textual ones; so in this sense Michaels’s critique is quite correct. Indeed, my discussion helps explain why the notion of racial identity could be so mistaken about bodies: its expectations regarding bodies were shaped by its understanding of quite different material, literary texts. But in addition to prompting mistaken accounts of bodies, the nineteenth-century extension of literary analysis from texts to bodies was also, I am arguing, an astoundingly expansive projection of a text-based pattern of thinking from a literary-critical into a socio-political domain. Thus while viewing this projection in the former way, as a mistake about biology, rightly sees it as a problematic reliance on empirical commitments that the biological sciences cannot support, viewing it in the latter light, as an extension to bodies of a pattern of thinking initially focused upon texts, permits us to see the enabling role played by literary history in the formation of these seemingly non-literary – i.e. supposedly biological and corporeal rather than

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textual – accounts of collective identity. By proceeding in this manner – by, in effect, subsuming thinking that is supposedly biological within thinking that I am arguing was actually textual – my account permits a more extended historical narrative of identity to be told: from the early nineteenth century to the close of the twentieth, a variety of writers (leading up to and including Toni Morrison and Seamus Heaney) have derived accounts of national as well as racial identity from a shared pattern of thinking, one that roots collective identities in the formal effects of literary texts.¹⁹

In offering this specifically literary history of racial identity, this book proceeds in accordance with the recent observations of historian Thomas Holt. “The idea that race is socially constructed,” Holt observes, “implies also that it can and must be constructed differently at different historical moments and in different social contexts.”²⁰ Race, Holt continues, “attaches itself to and draws sustenance from other social phenomena” (21), and among these phenomena, I will argue, is the formal analysis of literary texts. But in order to tell such a history effectively, Holt observes, critics of race must “adopt a conception of historical transformation, in which we recognize that a new historical construct is never entirely new and the old is never entirely supplanted by the new. Rather the new is grafted onto the old” (20). As I will show, in the late nineteenth century a new understanding of racial identity in bodies was grafted onto an older idea of racial identity in literary texts, and that account had itself been grafted onto a still older idea, an early nineteenth-century understanding of literary texts as bearers of a specifically national identity. While this book will be predominantly concerned with tracing this literary history in the work of nineteenth-century writers, it will also seek to establish the implications of this literary history for the recent moment, a moment, as I’ve already suggested, in which writers like Toni Morrison and Seamus Heaney join literary critics in advancing this pattern of thought. As we shall see, the contribution of Morrison and Heaney to this long-standing pattern of thinking has been to infuse it with renewed vitality and prestige, extending the literary history of racial identity into the current moment and establishing it as an essential feature of the literary and critical present.

IDENTITY AND PASSING

By tracing current accounts of racial identity to literary history – and particularly to the history of formal effects – this book’s understanding of race and racial identity differs in important ways from other critical accounts