# Reviews

**Jeanne Cortiel, *With a Barbarous Din: Race and Ethnic Encounter in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016. 281 pages. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6557-8.**

'Triangulation,' the American Heritage Dictionary informs us, is "the establishment of a political position that differs from two existing or opposing positions, especially in being moderate." In politics, in other words, it names a practice that seeks to persuade by minimizing the differences between two choices. In the academy, in contrast, it has increasingly come to be seen as a term promising an escape from the suffocating tyranny of all kinds of binaries. As such a positively loaded term, "triangulation" figures prominently in Jeanne Cortiel's *With a Barbarous Din: Race and Ethnic Encounter in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. By introducing "ethnicity" into the study of representations of racial relations in mid-nineteenth-century American literature, Cortiel wants to enable "a reading of nineteenth-century American literature that looks beyond Anglo-Saxon monoculturalism and the bipolarity of a slavery-based race system" (15).

To that end, she offers readings of five different texts published around 1855: Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's second anti-slavery novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, the first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and finally John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit*. These are very different texts, but Cortiel highlights their similarity rather than their singularity: all "engage with contemporary delimitations of 'race' but also find ways to transcend their terms" (32). More specifically, her method, Cortiel declares, is that "of reading ahistorically through the structural opposition between race and ethnicity" (34).

In practice, this means that Cortiel ignores not history so much as definitional clarity. Throughout, race is "conceptualized […] as a scientific concept grounded in a basic dualistic opposition or binary" (242), even

though race clearly is not a binary category but allows for multiple categories. Cortiel notes as much herself when discussing Louis Agassiz's *Types of Mankind* (which lists eight different races), but makes light of this circumstance, claiming that "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" (27). That may well be true, but that does not mean that race per se is best seen as a binary. It is difficult to escape the impression that Cortiel casts race as a binary simply to make ethnicity seem a comparatively more nuanced concept.

"Ethnicity," Cortiel claims, "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" (19). Frustratingly, but characteristically for the writing style throughout, Cortiel fails to explain what this "textual structure" that ethnicity names looks like. Nor is it by any means clear how the aesthetic and erotic qualities of a text supposedly relate to each other, or how ethnicity "as a way of looking at a text" differs from other ways of looking at aesthetic aspects of texts.

Unsurprisingly, given the definitional fuzziness of the study's central analytical term, Cortiel's study is rich in jargon, but poor in genuine insight. When we are told that in "both 'Benito Cereno' and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the author's body is either radically absent (in Melville's case) or fully present (in Douglass' case)" (121), I cannot help but think that surely the author's *body* is not present in either of these texts, and that even had it been metaphorically present in one of them, it would have made more sense to say so than to claim that it is either present or absent in both. Other times, Cortiel would have the text say something it demonstrably does not. Discussing *Dred*, for instance, she claims that the novel's "epigraph points to an undefined ethnic encounter in the chaotic space of the Dismal Swamp" (143), when in fact there is no encounter to be encountered in the two stanzas from Thomas Moore's "A Ballad. The Lake of the Dismal Swamp" in question; they speak only of a man who enters a place where "man never trod before."

Cortiel would also have us believe that *Dred* in its entirety is informed by a "gap between the narrator and the authorial presence in the text" (153), that diminishes "the authority of the narrator" (155), and throughout "demonstrat[es] the limits of the narrator's imagination" (148). If one wants

to make the case for Stowe as a super-sophisticated author, who – decades ahead of Henry James – would have the reader spot the difference between the narratorial voice and her true authorial intention, one needs to have a strong argument indeed. Cortiel bases her case for the unreliability of *Dred*'s narrator on the fact that Milly, one of its principal African American characters, is said to remind "one of the Scripture expression 'upright as a palm-tree'." To Cortiel's mind this shows that the narrator slips "into popular biblical misinterpretation," since the phrase in its original context describes idols that can do neither harm nor good. It hence "conveys just a hint of incompetence on the part of the narrator, which distinguishes her from the theologically competent authorial presence in the text" (149). But why should it be beyond Stowe to use a colorful biblical expression locally, without taking account of the full implications of the phrase in its original context? After all, when Tiff, one of the characters Cortiel claims escapes "narratorial control" (152), does so in merging "Old and New Testament in his prayer" (147), Cortiel praises his reading as "emblematic for his function as breaker of binaries" (148). Why not extend the same generosity to the narrator who recounts what Tiff and all the other characters do? One could much more plausibly argue that in contrast to what is the case in Henry James, or even Herman Melville (who is the more immediate point of comparison in this study), the functionality of Stowe's text *depends* upon the fusion of narratorial and authorial voice. Thus Stowe makes no effort at all to distinguish herself from the narrator in her Preface to *Dred*, but makes a point of emphasizing that the "writer has placed in the mouth of one of *her* leading characters" (my emphasis) the words of a historical figure. Everything suggests that to Stowe's mind at least, the author of *Dred* is also its narrator.

Cortiel takes no note of such obvious characteristics of the text in her readings, but prefers to hunt down far-fetched potential significations through tracing transtextual relations. These are occasionally illuminating, but not sufficient to convince this reader, at least, that the texts analyzed consistently exhibit "the relinquishment of epistemological control on the part of the narrator or speaker" (241), nor that they all perform the same kind of cultural work. For regardless of what she reads, Cortiel finds the same things: "subversive triangulations that destabilize the validity of the binary opposition between whiteness and blackness reappear in all of the texts that I analyze here" (37). Indeed, Cortiel admits to finding such triangulations even when the binary in question is not present, for while *Joaquín*

*Murieta* "omits African American characters, it draws on a similar discursive contest between race and ethnicity as "Benito Cereno," *My Bondage and My Freedom*, *Dred*, and *Leaves of Grass*" (40).

The upshot of Cortiel's protracted procedure, then, is that the works discussed all seem to work in the same way, and say the same thing. Precisely what they say, is another matter. Cortiel favors the grand sounding statement over the precise point. "As in 'Benito Cereno' and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, an *ethnic multiplicity* becomes possible in *Dred* at precisely those moments in which *the cultural space of the other* is recognized as *a semantic system that operates outside the comprehension of the speaker*" (155; my emphasis), Cortiel informs us in a characteristically imprecise and ideologically supercharged turn of phrase. This is the kind of writing that gives academese a bad name. A reader may be forgiven for thinking that Cortiel comes awfully close, here, to saying: *something desirable* becomes possible in *Dred* at precisely those moments in which *something desirable* is recognized as *something desirable*, just as it does in any text read that way.

Cortiel tells us in conclusion that "all of these very different texts are centrally concerned with negotiating a fundamental duality that is confronted with a multiplicity structured around relational triangulations" (238). She also makes clear that in her view it is these confrontations between "duality" and "multiplicity" that we should thank for everything that is good and progressive about the novels she has discussed. Each of them she claims, is informed by a "narrative unreliability." Precisely how this term is to be understood is not explained, but the gist seems to be that readers should feel free to ignore what texts actually say, and come up with whatever they want them to say by setting them in relation to other texts available at the time.

Perhaps I am being unfair; but to judge by *With a Barbarous Din*, the academic practice of triangulation much like its political counterpart tends to close down rather than open up possibilities.

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