

MINORITY REPORTS

The Future of Minority Studies

A timely series that represents the most innovative work being done in the broad field defined as “minority studies.” Drawing on the intellectual and political vision of the Future of Minority Studies (FMS) Research Project, this book series will publish studies of the lives, experiences, and cultures of “minority” groups—broadly defined to include all those whose access to social and cultural institutions is limited primarily because of their social identities.

For more information about the Future of Minority Studies (FMS) International Research Project, visit www.fmsproject.cornell.edu

Series Editors:

Linda Martín Alcoff, Hunter College, CUNY
Michael Hames-García, University of Oregon
Satya P. Mohanty, Cornell University
Paula M. L. Moya, Stanford University
Tobin Siebers, University of Michigan

Identity Politics Reconsidered

edited by Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García,
Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya

Ambiguity and Sexuality: A Theory of Sexual Identity

by William S. Wilkerson

Identity in Education

edited by Susan Sánchez-Casal and Amie A. Macdonald

Rethinking Chicana/o and Latina/o Popular Culture

by Daniel Enrique Pérez

The Future of Diversity: Academic Leaders Reflect on American Higher Education

edited by Daniel Little and Satya P. Mohanty

Minority Reports: Identity and Social Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

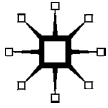
by Michael Borgstrom

MINORITY REPORTS

IDENTITY AND SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE

Michael Borgstrom

palgrave
macmillan



MINORITY REPORTS

Copyright © Michael Borgstrom, 2010.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2010 978-0-230-62263-0

All rights reserved.

A significantly different version of chapter 3 appeared in *PMLA* 118.5 (October 2003) and is reprinted by permission of the copyright owner, The Modern Language Association of America.

An earlier version of chapter 5 is reprinted, with permission, from *African American Review* 40.4 (Winter 2006).

First published in 2010 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-38424-2

ISBN 978-0-230-10971-1 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230109711

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: July 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For
Mom and Dad
and
Christopher*

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction: Identity, History, Narrative	1
1 What Do We Want from Harriet Wilson?	19
2 Frank J. Webb and the Fate of the Sentimental Race Man	37
3 Setting the Record Straight in <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	55
4 Frederick Douglass and the Limits of Knowledge	75
5 Face Value: Ambivalent Citizenship in <i>Iola Leroy</i>	93
Conclusion: Return from the Beyond	109
<i>Notes</i>	117
<i>Bibliography</i>	159
<i>Index</i>	179

This page intentionally left blank

PREFACE

Many years ago, when my brother and I were small, our dad would regularly remind us of the limits on originality. “Whatever you can think up,” he would tell us, “has already been thought of by someone else. The best you can hope for is to realize that *how* you think about things may be different from other people.” This statement fascinated my brother and me. We would rack our brains trying to think of something (anything) that had not been thought of before. All books had already been written; all inventions already dreamed up. We were awed not just by our father’s apparent wisdom about such matters, but also by the sense of its overarching applicability to every aspect of our lives. It was our first introduction, I think, to abstract concepts like innovation, history, and epistemology.

When I share my dad’s assertion with friends today, they’re often appalled at his parenting. After all, they say, good parents encourage their children to be creative, to stretch themselves, to dream large. As a kid, however, I found my father’s statements ironically quite comforting, and as years went by, relieved of the burden of originality, I could focus on learning things I didn’t know, secure in the realization that in doing so I was implicitly joining a community that would, in time, reveal itself. Besides, my dad encouraged us in other ways. He was the only father I knew, for example, who urged his kids to draw on their bedroom walls, and the only one, later, who insisted that his oldest son (me) switch from a major in business to one in English. As a jock who didn’t go to college himself, he was often baffled by the fact that I was so intensely different from him (roller skating, not woodworking; *Solid Gold*, not *Monday Night Football*). But much to my dad’s credit, he let me know even as a small boy that these differences did not disappoint him; instead, he found them fascinating. Difference, in his view, was a good thing.

In time, I came to understand that my dad’s argument against originality was, in fact, an argument about identity. He showed me that the experiences I had had, and the ways that those experiences informed who I understood myself to be, directly influenced how I

saw and interpreted the social world. And that realization, he often pointed out, likely would affect future events in my life. Who one is, he would say, may be just as important as what one does. The point wasn't to be original but to be aware—to see that who I was determined how I saw the world, and to recognize that that dynamic held true for everyone else as well.

My dad's commentary on the ways that *what* we know are linked to *how* we know (and thus to *who* we are) forms the basis of this study. It argues that reading, writing, and interpretation is neither disinterested in nor inseparable from social identity; indeed, it takes as axiomatic the fact that identity (and the experiences connected to identity) is fundamental to the process of acquiring social knowledge. This is not a popular position. Because *Minority Reports* claims that identity categories such as race, sexuality, and gender can function as significant avenues for cultural analysis, it implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) argues against pervasive theoretical paradigms that tend to see identity as merely incidental to literary and cultural analysis. Instead, it builds on critical work that sees identity as a salient, even vital, theoretical tool. In this way, *Minority Reports* centers on a number of analytical issues: How do the social identities of authors determine how we read their works? What sorts of critical assumptions do readers bring to the literature they study? How might such expectations limit analyses of authors and their texts? How might they expand them?

Such questions highlight one of the primary theoretical incongruities in contemporary literary and cultural analysis: notwithstanding the recent (and nearly ubiquitous) scholarly suspicion of identity categories, critics continue to rely heavily on identity-based paradigms, particularly in studies of American literature and culture. Indeed, much of the analytical focus on texts by early African American writers, for example, reminds us that books, like bodies, have specific identities routinely attached to them. Studies of authors such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, and Elizabeth Keckley tend to concentrate almost exclusively (and understandably) on the ways that their works inform readers' appreciation and understanding of African American identity in the nineteenth century. Such a dynamic thus notes how the critical reception of minority writers and their texts are often linked to the expectations readers continue to have for identity categories in general, and for minority identity in particular—"minority" broadly defined here in terms of cultural power rather than numbers, referring to such social factors as gender, race, and sexuality.

In calling attention to the enduring social and political salience of this dynamic, *Minority Reports* provides a textual and theoretical defense of the use of identity categories in American studies. It does this by explaining how early minority authors offer compelling ways to talk about identity without resorting to the narrow determinism of essentialist paradigms. In taking seriously the *experiences* of those who feel the lived effects of social identity, these authors, I argue, demonstrate the multiple ways that identities generate crucial *knowledge* about the structure and function of the social world, both in terms of their specific historical contexts and their texts' ongoing relevance to contemporary culture. By thus exploring the connections between subjective experience and socially grounded knowledge, the works I examine demonstrate how texts not traditionally understood as theoretical can profoundly transform conventional (and often limited) understandings of the relationship between minority identity and critical social analysis. This body of literature, in other words, highlights the ways that what we write and how we read are inextricably linked to who we are—what we privilege, ignore, celebrate, or disregard. In this way, these texts make clear that social identity matters a great deal to interpretive activity. Indeed, in contrast to recent calls to dismantle identity categories that appear to oversimplify complex selves, these works suggest that to do away with such categories may be to do away with crucial epistemological and cultural tools.

Minority Reports opens with an introductory discussion of the three key components that inform the project as a whole: identity, history, and narrative. Here, I provide an overview of the book's definition of identity as a concept, an examination of identity's specific role within nineteenth-century Americanist literary scholarship, and a commentary on the ways that textual representations of minority identity offer specific social insights that are indispensable to contemporary cultural and theoretical analysis. As the introduction explains, a concentrated focus on minority identity categories in nineteenth-century texts helps to highlight the epistemological significance of these early works as well as to reveal many of the implicit values and ideologies held by modern readers.

The chapters that follow elaborate on this dynamic through diverse examinations of the ways that critical theories of social identity can arise from close readings of these early texts, rather than from anachronistic applications of contemporary theoretical paradigms to nineteenth-century works. By emphasizing the epistemic contributions of early minority authors, my analysis underscores the multiple ways that what we write and how we read is often linked to who we

are. Rather than attempt to move “beyond” the categories that shape cultural difference, my analysis suggests that critical theory should both acknowledge the durability of these differences and marshal them to serve alternative theoretical (and political) goals. I argue, in other words, for deconstructive paradigms that nevertheless respect real manifestations of social difference by exploring the connections between subjective experience and socially grounded knowledge. In this respect, *Minority Reports* not only calls for a broader rethinking of the theoretical paradigms frequently used to examine minority identity within literary and cultural analysis, but also illustrates through its individual (and collective) analyses how specific epistemic perspectives inevitably inform our interpretive abilities and decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A colleague (who is also a friend) once told me that the acknowledgments section of any book is invariably more important than the book itself. Given the sheer number of people who provided support and encouragement while I worked on this project, I have new appreciation for the significance of that statement—and I feel an especially keen pleasure in recording my gratitude to so many colleagues, friends, and loved ones.

This book's origins stretch back to graduate school, where the guidance and generosity of David Van Leer, Linda Morris, and Joanne Feit Diehl helped shape my thinking in crucial ways; to all three, I offer my sincere and affectionate thanks. I am grateful as well to illuminating conversations with Liz Constable, Mardena Creek-Michelson, Beth Freeman, Bishnu Ghosh, Michael Hoffman, Clarence Major, Riché Richardson, and Catherine Robson. At San Diego State, I am lucky to be part of a supportive intellectual community that also manages to sustain a much-appreciated sense of humor. Alida Allison, Laurel Amtower, Quentin Bailey, Joanna Brooks, June Cummins-Lewis, William Nericcio, Phillip Serrato, and Joseph Thomas make coming to work a pleasure.

I am appreciative too of the conviviality of Sandra Alcosser, Martha-E. Casselman, Clare Colquitt, Laurie Edson, Jerry Farber, Annie Foral, Mary Garcia, Ron Gervais, Sinda Gregory, Jerry Griswold, Mozelle Harding, Peter Herman, Ilya Kaminsky, David Kamper, Lynda Koolish, Sherry Little, Larry McCaffery, Lila Nericcio, Harry Polkinhorn, Carole Scott, and Carey Wall. Several students have been instrumental in helping me think through the ideas in this book, and in that regard I would especially like to thank Kacie Flowers, Dana Jackson, Katie Ness, Andy O'Clancy, Ranmali Rodrigo, Melissa Soltman, Lindsay Steinman, Eric Stottlemeyer, and Emily Thomas. For important support of this project, I am grateful to Dean Paul Wong and the College of Arts and Letters at San Diego State University. I am likewise grateful to the editorial staff at

Palgrave Macmillan; it has been a pleasure to work with Julia Cohen, Burke Gerstenschlager, and especially Samantha Hasey.

I cannot praise highly enough the intellectual, professional, and personal camaraderie that characterizes the Future of Minority Studies Research Project. In no other community have I experienced such intense scholarly engagement combined with such a strong esprit de corps, and working with this group has been one of the highlights of my academic life. Plus, they are all really good dancers. I am very much indebted to Linda Martín Alcoff and Satya Mohanty, who codirected the Future of Minority Studies 2007 summer seminar at Cornell University, and to the many colleagues and friends with whom I've had the pleasure to work under the auspices of FMS: Alice Cho, Tracy Fisher, Roxana Galusca, Zenzele Isoke, Michelle Jarman, Sharmila Lodhia, Gaile Pohlhaus, H. L. T. Quan, Grant Silva, Michelle Tellez, Brian Thomas, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard. My work benefited significantly from audiences at Cornell University and Spelman College, and particularly from Johnella Butler, Sandy Darity, Michele Elam, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Kenneth McClane, Carol Moeller, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Paula Moya, Mark Anthony Neal, John Riofrio, Ramón Saldívar, Tyrone Simpson, and John Su. For crucial encouragement and friendship, I am grateful to Michael Hames-García, Ernesto Martínez, Daniel Enrique Pérez, and especially Michelle Tellez.

I am very fortunate to have an extended group of wonderful, devoted friends, many of whom I have known for several decades: Kevin Cornelius, Ben Durbin, Philip Ellsworth, Scott Godfrey, Jan Goggans, Andrew Gross, Judi Henderson, Laura Konigsberg, Erika Kreger, Tiffany Aldrich MacBain, Robert Marcos, Christina Muraco, Rebecca Newsom, Andrew Ragone, Rod Romesburg, Jodi Schorb, Connie Stamas, Jennifer Trainor, Stephanie Wells, Anjali Williams, and Annelise Zamula. I am also keenly aware that who I am, how I write, and what I have to say has been inexorably shaped by the love and encouragement of my parents, Barbara and Kenneth Borgstrom, my brother, Steven Borgstrom, as well as many other members of my family: Nancy Borgstrom, Ruth Borgstrom, David Duke, Dennis Duke, Lara Skondovich Duke, Shirley Duke, Kim Gelfand, Carole Gideon, and Ruby Low. My mom, in particular, has always been my greatest source of support, and I am extremely fortunate (and very grateful) to be her son. Although some I hold dear did not live to see

the completion of this project, their passing does not diminish their importance to my work or their profound significance to my life.

I am thankful, finally, to three people in particular. Satya Mohanty took an interest in my work at a critical moment, and it is not an overstatement to say that his invitation to be part of the FMS Research Project as a Mellon fellow significantly altered my academic life in the best possible ways. I am deeply grateful for his ongoing encouragement and advice.

As I have noted elsewhere, it is the luckiest sort of coincidence that one of the smartest people I know also happens to be my best friend. For nearly thirty years my constant cohort in work and play has been Anna Muraco, a woman whose generosity, compassion, and strength of character have no equal. Without a moment's hesitation, she willingly put aside her own work to read or listen to every word in the following pages, and the fact that as a sociologist she can talk with extraordinary erudition about nineteenth-century American literature is a testament to her unwavering devotion and great patience. I benefit daily from her sound advice, sharp intellect, and fantastic sense of humor. Her importance in my life, as she well knows, is inestimable.

And then there's Christopher. For over a decade, he has kept me laughing, endured my quirks, provided personal and professional feedback, and offered his unfailing, unwavering love. He has never not known me as an academic, and yet, amazingly, he still hangs in there—despite the fact that he believes most academics take themselves much, much too seriously. He continues to remind me of this particular conviction on a daily basis, for which I am (almost daily) grateful. Nobody advises me more wisely, supports me more fiercely, or makes me laugh harder than he does. I am the luckiest guy in the world.