

The Harlem and Irish Renaissances

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Language, Identity, and Representation

Tracy Mishkin

Foreword by George Bornstein

University Press of Florida

Gainesville · Tallahassee · Tampa · Boca Raton · Pensacola · Orlando · Miami · Jacksonville

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03 02 01 00 99 98 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mishkin, Tracy.

The Harlem and Irish renaissances: language, identity, and
representation / Tracy Mishkin with a foreword
by George Bornstein.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-8130-1611-8 (hardcover: alk. paper)

1. American literature—Afro-American authors—History and criticism.
2. English literature—Irish authors—History and criticism.
3. Literature, Comparative—American and English.
4. Literature, Comparative—English and American.
5. Language and culture—United States.
6. Afro-Americans—Intellectual life.
7. Language and culture—Ireland.
8. Group identity in literature.
9. Ireland—Intellectual life.
10. Mimesis in literature.

11. Harlem Renaissance. I. Title.

PS153.N5M57 1998

810.9'896073—dc21 98-27017

The University Press of Florida is the scholarly publishing agency
for the State University System of Florida, comprising Florida
A & M University, Florida Atlantic University, Florida Interna-
tional University, Florida State University, University of Central
Florida, University of Florida, University of North Florida,
University of South Florida, and University of West Florida.

University Press of Florida
15 Northwest 15th Street
Gainesville, FL 32611
<http://www.upf.com>

for George Kelley

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Foreword

When in liner notes to a recent CD the contemporary African-American folk-rock singer Laura Love describes her music as “Afro-Celt,” or when in an interview the Irish singer Bono cites blues and gospel music among the primary influences on the sound of his rock band U2, they engage in crosscultural constructions that have existed for at least two centuries between those two groups. Explored by Tracy Mishkin in this splendid new study, such connections or “crossings” belong to a new wave of scholarship in the 1990s, which blurs the lines of race and ethnicity that scholarship of the previous two decades tended to keep distinct. The new work takes its cue from theoretical contributions by Homi Bhabha, Cornel West, Werner Sollors, and Henry Louis Gates, among others. It includes recent studies like Susan Gubar’s *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* and Linda Browder’s *Ethnic Performance and American Identities*, along with recent collections like Elaine Ginsberg’s *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* and Mishkin’s own *Literary Influence and African-American Writers*. Far from heralding a return to a less complicated past, the new scholarship instead strives to recomplicate crucial issues in the production of both literature and identity that have a particular pertinence not only to literary study but to some of the most crucial and contested social debates of our day.

Whether welcoming, anxious, or somewhere in between, the new studies suggest in various ways that much art is socially liminal, created often at the intersection of two or more different cultures. Models of purity and separatism of ethnic identity seem less satisfactory than those based on cultural interaction. Yet it would be easy but misleading to compile a list of, say, great African-American writers of the past century

who have movingly described such interactions. The list might include, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois in the famous passage of *The Souls of Black Folk* where he invokes sitting with Shakespeare and meeting Balzac, Dumas, Aristotle, and Aurelius; Paul Robeson in his autobiography when he identifies the key influence on his education being his father taking him through Homer and Virgil in the original Greek and Latin; Zora Neale Hurston recounting in *Dust Tracks on a Road* her desire to be an English teacher to impart to others her fervor for English Romantic poets, especially Coleridge; or Ralph Ellison in his great essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” identifying his passion for T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as a poem that “seized my mind” and prompted “my conscious education in literature.”

But to stop with such attestations might provide too easy a picture of the real stress involved in multicultural creation and response. Perhaps nearer to the mark are two avowals, each well known in its own tradition but whose congruence with the other tradition deserves emphasis here. The first is W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous passage on “double consciousness,” itself a term continuing the Wordsworthian echo of the opening section of *Souls of Black Folk*:

One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife. . . . In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost . . . to be both a Negro and an American . . . to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture.

Correspondingly, Irish writer W. B. Yeats described his own double consciousness of both Irish and English elements this way in his late essay “A General Introduction for My Work”:

The “Irishry” have preserved their ancient “deposit” through wars which, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, became wars of extermination. No people, Lecky said at the opening of his *Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, have undergone greater persecution, nor did that persecution altogether cease up to our own day. No people hate as we do in whom that past is always alive, there are moments when hatred poisons my life. . . . Then I remind myself that though mine is the first English marriage I know of in the direct

line, all my family names are English, and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser, and to Blake, perhaps also to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate.

Both passages display both the power and the pain of cultural hybridity. Far from unusual, such avowals of multiple allegiance seem the normal condition of writers, and of ourselves. We write as and are members of various groups—whether defined by “race,” ethnicity, class, gender, family, religion, or nationality—and yet of a broader community as well. In that sense, Du Bois’s noble aspiration is our own: “to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture.”

Coming after a phase of criticism has sought relentlessly to demystify claims of art to “universality,” unmasking instead the social contingency of its production and reception, the newer scholarship exemplified in Mishkin’s tracing of Irish and African-American connections here suggests that ethnic interaction is the normative state of cultural production, and that fantasies of separatist purity and tradition are themselves urgently in need of demystification. In recent theoretical statements two leading African-American critics have urged just those contentions. Cornell West in his *Prophetic Thought in Modern Times* (1993) writes that “from the very beginning we must call into question any notions of pure traditions or pristine heritages, or any civilization or culture having a monopoly on virtue or insight. Ambiguous legacies, hybrid cultures. By hybrid, of course, we mean cross-cultural fertilization. Every culture that we know is a result of the weaving of antecedent cultures.” In a similar vein, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., also uses the metaphor of hybridity in *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1992): “Pluralism sees culture as porous, dynamic, and interactive, rather than as the fixed property of particular ethnic groups . . . the world we live in is multicultural already. Mixing and hybridity are the rule, not the exception.” All culture may be multicultural already, and the task of education may be to reveal the multiculturalism that is already there rather to imagine a separatism that never was on land or sea.

In displaying the multiculturalism of culture, Tracy Mishkin’s *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances* provides an outstanding example of what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description.” She begins with two chapters historically grounding the two renaissances, with full display of the anal-

ologies between them drawn by both participants and outsiders. Mishkin's nuanced portrait acknowledges important differences between Irish and African-American experience up to the early years of our century even while foregrounding the similarities that united them and even caused the Irish Renaissance to be invoked as a model by makers of the Harlem one. Those features included experience of oppression, loss of a traditional language, and lack of control over group representations. In subsequent chapters on language, identity, and the image of the "folk," Mishkin shows how both movements saw links between liberation, linguistic construction, and regaining of control over the means and content of representation. At once a sensitive recuperation of a past cultural moment and a contribution to our current one, Mishkin's study both participates in our present national conversation and prepares the way for future ones.

George Bornstein

Preface

Renaissance is a beautiful word. We use it even when
we are not sure what has been reborn.

Mary Lou Kohfeldt

While I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I heard that a black theater troupe in North Carolina had been influenced by Ireland's Abbey Theatre during the Harlem Renaissance. Intrigued, I began to look for evidence. Although I did not find any,¹ I did find other instances of influence involving the Harlem and Irish renaissances as well as a great many similarities between them. However, despite the numerous comparisons of these two movements made in newspaper articles earlier in this century, little scholarly research has been done on the subject. The connection is occasionally established in works about African-American theater or the Harlem Renaissance, most notably in Nathan Huggins's 1971 work, *Harlem Renaissance*, in which he referred twice to the difficulties faced by both Irish and African-American writers (203, 231).² Furthermore, in 1981 *Éire-Ireland* published a brief article by Brian Gallagher comparing the Harlem and Irish renaissances, and in 1990 C. L. Innes published a monograph comparing African and Irish literature that contains several references to an African-American and Irish connection. Generally speaking, however, the similarities have been little remarked since the Harlem movement ended. The aim of this work is to revisit a paradigm that seems at one time to have been well known in intellectual circles, both black and white, and suggest how it might continue to be useful today.

Because the Harlem and Irish renaissances were, in Cary Wintz's phrase, "state[s] of mind" (2) as much as movements for literary and

social change, many works on the renaissances begin by attempting to establish parameters: when these movements began and ended, how they should be studied, what type of texts and which writers should be included. Scholars must define Irish literature—does it include literature in Irish and English?—and decide whether the Harlem movement represents African-American literature or literature by African-American people.

I have left extended consideration of these issues to those whose work focuses on one movement or the other, but one issue that it seems useful to address at the outset is the question of dating. It is generally agreed that the Irish Renaissance began in the mid-1880s, as a group of young, mostly Anglo-Irish cultural nationalists gathered around the aging revolutionary John O'Leary, and that it ended around the time of the establishment of the puritanical Irish Free State in 1922. The beginning of the Harlem Renaissance is usually set in the early 1920s, when African-American writers began to congregate in New York City, and most scholars agree that the Great Depression of the 1930s slowly ended it. For the purposes of this work, I have occasionally considered writers, such as James Joyce, who wrote during one of these renaissances but did not affiliate themselves with them and writers, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, who flourished shortly before these movements and served as important precursors. My approach involves a thematic comparison rather than an exhaustive survey; therefore, certain writers will receive a different amount of attention than they might in a more traditional study of one movement or the other. I have attempted to keep the chronology clear as I move back and forth in time between these two literary renaissances. However, despite the fact that the Irish Renaissance largely predates the cultural upheaval and accomplishments of the early years of the twentieth century and the Harlem Renaissance generally postdates them, the participants in the renaissances focussed on the similarities, not the differences, to an extent that often feels quite ahistorical. Yet this should not be surprising, for—Virginia Woolf's comment on human character changing in December 1910 notwithstanding—prejudice and discrimination continued along remarkably similar lines an ocean and a generation away.³

A few words about terminology. When a quotation includes an outdated racial term such as "negro" or "Aframerican," I have retained the original usage. For my own purposes, I use "African-American" and "black" interchangeably. By "Anglo-Irish" I mean Irish Protestants of

English or Scottish descent, and by “Ascendancy” I mean the Anglo-Irish power elite after the late eighteenth century. I refer to the English and Irish languages, as well as to African-American and Hiberno-English dialects of English.

I would like to thank those who made the publication of this work possible, primarily the members of my dissertation committee—George Bornstein and Rafia Zafar, my co-chairs, and Leo McNamara and Janet Hart, my third and outside readers. I have also received helpful suggestions from Richard Bizot, Zack Bowen, Tony Hale, and Joseph Skerrett and a great deal of support from my colleagues at Georgia College and State University.

Finally, I have been extremely fortunate to have George Kelley in my life, both to offer insightful comments on my research and to take the edge off my workaholic tendencies.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material.

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