

# Reading difference: How race and ethnicity function as tools for critical appraisal

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## Abstract

Literary theorists and cultural sociologists alike acknowledge that there are no universal standards for appraising the value of a book. Yet, book critics regularly pronounce the literary merits and failures of novels in their reviews. Research on cultural criticism has shed considerable light on how reviewers are able to assess the meaning and value of novels in the absence of objective indicators of literary quality by relying on different cultural “tools”. This study examines how critics use authors’ race and ethnicity as a tool for constructing the value of literary fiction. Based on analysis of 265 book reviews from *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker* magazine, I find that reviewers use racial and ethnic identifiers to: (1) establish the authenticity of the novels, (2) classify works into ethnic genres, and (3) nominally identify international literary talent. I also present data on what influence racial and ethnic identification has for critics’ overall assessment of the books under review.

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## 1. Introduction

How do we know whether a novel is good or bad? Book reviews are an important guide since they lay out the strengths and weaknesses of a text as determined by book critics. And we value critics’ opinions as culturally sanctioned connoisseurs (Baumann, 2007a; Janssen, 2006; van Rees, 1989). Yet cultural sociologists maintain that literary value is not an inherent quality waiting to be unearthed by a cultivated consumer. There are no objective indicators of literary value; therefore, what reviewers identify as “good”, as “literature” and—perhaps most importantly—“good literature” is not *natural*, but *normative* (van Rees, 1989).

In the absence of objective measures for literary value, research shows that critics rely on other “tools” (Swidler, 1986) to guide their aesthetic judgments such as critical-literary theories (Corse and Griffin, 1997; Corse and Westervelt, 2002; van Rees, 1987) and the opinions of their fellow

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critics (de Nooy, 1999; Janssen, 1997; Rosengren, 1987; van Rees, 1987). The present study examines how literary critics use authors' race or ethnicity as an additional tool for critical appraisal.

Racial and ethnic categories figure prominently in the United States as principles for organizing social life (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Massey, 2007). While these categories are socially constructed, they have objective consequences for access to important resources—including housing, political resources, and opportunities in the labor market (Hsueh and Tienda, 1996; Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Massey, 2007; Massey et al., 1993; Massey and Mullen, 1984; Omi and Winant, 1994). Race and ethnicity have also been shown to have consequences for the cultural market (Banks, 2010; DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990; Dowd, 2003; Dowd and Blyler, 2002; Roy, 2004); though exactly how the race and ethnicity of cultural *producers* influence the critical reception of their work is not well understood.<sup>1</sup> I examine this topic empirically using literary fiction as a case study, which is well suited for exploring racial and ethnic categories because of close ties between literature and how we imagine different communities (Anderson, 1978; Berkers, 2009; Corse, 1995, 1997; Griswold, 1992). So, when a writer is identified as an “African-American writer” or some other hyphenated “ethnic-author”, what implications does this have for the perceived value of the work they produce?

In what follows, I outline the unique role book reviewers play in constructing literary value and review prevailing literary theories about how to “correctly” appreciate fiction. Next, I present empirical data drawn from analysis of 265 book reviews published in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker* magazine to demonstrate (i) how critics discursively integrate authors' race and ethnicity into reviews; and (ii) what significance these ethno-racial identifiers have for the overall evaluation of the novels. I argue that the critics in my study engage in an interpretive strategy I term *reading difference* whereby an author's ethno-racial position is used as a criterion for evaluating the author's creative work.

## 2. Literary criticism in context

Literary critics are key agents in the social construction of literary value. Critics function as “surrogate consumers” imbued with the cultural authority not only to judge a book's value, but also to decide what factors are relevant for arriving at this judgment (Ekelund and Borjesson, 2002; Hirsch, 1972; Janssen, 2006; van Rees, 1983). Beyond simply informing a large anonymous audience about newly published fiction, critics' literary discourse actively shapes the way books are understood by the wider reading public (Hirsch, 1972; Janssen, 2006; Kramer, 1970; van Rees, 1983). Van Rees (1987) signaled this creative function when enumerating the threefold task of literary reviewers as *describing*, *interpreting*, and *evaluating* novels.

There are three branches of literary criticism: essayistic, academic, and journalistic (Van Rees, 1983). Literary essays are typically published in specialized monthly or quarterly literary reviews. Academic criticism is reserved for scholarly publications. While these two branches focus on “high-culture” rather than “popular” works, journalistic reviewers write about contemporary and newly-published fiction in daily or weekly newspapers and magazines. Newspaper and magazine critics decide what few titles among the leagues of newly-published

<sup>1</sup> One notable exception is Paul Lopes' (2002) *The Rise of the Jazz Art World*, which documents the historical rise of the jazz art world from the 1930s through to the post-war period in America. In this book, Lopes addresses racial tensions in the critical evaluation of jazz; for example, accusations of “Jim Crow” practice referring to critics giving preference to Black jazz musicians over White jazz musicians.

works will receive any critical attention with far reaching consequences for an author's success. Ekelund and Borjesson (2002), for example, found that simply being reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* (NYTBR) was a good predictor of whether writers went on to publish another novel, thus lending credence to the trade wisdom: “[I]t is better to get a negative review in the NYTBR than to get none at all” (Ekelund and Borjesson, 2002:354). And it is often from this initial pool of newspaper and magazine reviews that literary essayists and academics subsequently select novels and novelists as subjects for their own literary discourse (van Rees, 1983). Attracting the attention of newspaper and magazine critics is thus a necessary, if insufficient, step on the road to being consecrated as a high-culture novelist (Bourdieu, 1993; Janssen, 1998; van Rees, 1983).<sup>2</sup>

Macro- and micro-institutional factors come to bear on which novels are selected for review in newspapers and magazines. American critics are more likely to review work by domestic over foreign writers because of America's central position as a cultural producer within the global literary system<sup>3</sup> (Heilbron, 1999; Janssen, 2009). And among the foreign-titles that are reviewed, American critics are also more likely to review writers from nations with strong “geo-linguistic” ties to the United States (i.e., countries that are geographically proximate and whose national languages are similar) (Berkers et al., forthcoming; Heilbron, 1999). On a more micro-institutional level, it is reasonable to expect that publications have their own organizational norms and rules for deciding which novels are more or less appropriate for inclusion. For instance, Janssen (1997, 1998) observes that reviewers make note of the size and status of a novel's publisher and the opinions of fellow-critics to steer their selection practices.

That book reviewers make note of what other critics think to guide their own review selections underscores the social nature of literary criticism as a practice (Bourdieu, 1993; Janssen, 1997). In the absence of objective indicators of what makes one novel “good” and another “bad”, book critics have been shown to incrementally attune their literary judgments to approximate the opinions of their peers in what has been described as a process of “social orchestration” (Bourdieu, 1977; de Nooy, 1999; Janssen, 1997; van Rees, 1987).

Book reviewers also attend to prevailing interpretive strategies to guide their literary judgments. Cultural texts are multivocal and open to multiple interpretations (Griswold, 1987). Interpretive strategies are “framing devices” that shape how readers come to appreciate the meaning and value of the text (Corse and Griffin, 1997:196). In the case of literature, interpretive strategies include literary theories, like formalism, that espouse normative ideas about how “properly” to decipher the meaning and value of a book (Corse and Griffin, 1997; Corse and Westervelt, 2002; Patterson, 1995). Corse and Griffin (1997) demonstrate the importance of interpretive strategies when explaining how the rise of Black feminist theory was integral to transforming Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from a poorly received piece of “Negro-folklore” to its current framing as story about a woman's struggle for selfhood—and subsequently a central text in America's literary canon.

Given the importance of literary theories for understanding a novel's worth I now briefly review some of the dominant literary theories influencing contemporary literary criticism and how they relate to appreciating work by “ethnic-writers”.

<sup>2</sup> This important influence of contemporary critical opinion on future appraisals has also been established in studies of “retrospective consecration” in film (Allen and Lincoln, 2004) and music (Schmutz, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Based on interviews with magazine and newspaper Book Review editors, it is common practice for editors to select which books to review and then *assign* titles to specific book reviewers. So it may be more accurate to say that American critics are more likely to attend to domestic talent because the newspaper and magazine review editors do.

### 2.1. *On how to appreciate fiction*

Two important literary theories emerging over the past century are formalism and historicism. Formalism is closely associated with The New Criticism that rose to prominence in America during the 1930s and was predicated on the principle of aestheticism, or “art for art’s sake,” meaning that only formal properties of a novel ought to be considered when adjudicating its worth (Abrams, 1993). Prose is an example of a formal literary property broadly concerned with elements like word choice, grammar, literary devices, and writing on a sentence-by-sentence level. Others are voice and tone referring to the ethos conveyed in writing (Abrams, 1993). New Critics would focus on how a writer crafted such formal properties around a theme in a novel precluding any consideration of the novelist’s biography or social context.

The formalist approach fell out of favor during the 1960s with the increasing recognition that what constituted “good fiction”, especially as reflected by the American literary canon, was not based on purely aesthetic principles but the product of political choices and intimately tied with power (Adams, 1988; Corse, 1995; Corse and Griffin, 1997; Corse and Westervelt, 2002). Rejecting the way formalism treated books as ahistorical and completely separate from the author, the historicist approach came to the fore in the 1980s emphasizing that a novel’s specific social and political context was integral for assessing its meaning and value (Abrams, 1993; Patterson, 1995).

Today, formalist criteria still operate in critical-literary discourse (though few literary critics would argue that a novel’s value is fixed or trans-historical). But it has also become acceptable for critics to draw upon socio-political considerations—like the particular social location of the author—when engaging with a text. We thus require a sociological understanding of how literary critics actually incorporate these considerations into their reviews to further our understanding of the social construction of value.

Race and ethnicity are particularly germane socio-political considerations given that concerns about the inclusion/exclusion of literature by racial and ethnic minorities were integral to the literary “canon wars” that raged within academic departments in the post-war period; and racial and ethnic categories continue to function as central organizing principles in American social life outside of literary field (Massey, 2007).

There is some work that examines how literary criticism intersects with race and ethnicity. Perhaps most famous is Griswold’s study (1987), which looked at how literary critics from three separate nations had different readings of the same set of books by Barbadian-writer George Lamming. Briefly, UK reviewers emphasized a stylistic reading, West Indian reviewers emphasized themes of personal and civic identity, and American reviewers focused on race-relations in the books. Griswold takes this as evidence that the novels (and other cultural objects) do not have a stable set of meanings. Instead, how literary critics interpreted the novels was informed by the broader “social presuppositions” of their national context: for example, America’s national preoccupation with race may have influenced American critics’ race-relation readings of Lamming’s work. More recently, Berkers (2009) has found that authors are more likely to be classified by ethno-racial background in literary anthologies when racial and ethnic boundaries are strong in a society. These studies do not, however, engage directly with the question of how reviewers use the race or ethnicity of a writer to construct the value of her fiction. Book reviews are thus particularly suited for analysis because they outline a critic’s interpretation and evaluation of a novel and provide the opportunity to investigate how ethno-racial categories are made meaningful towards these ends.

### 3. Data and methods

#### 3.1. Sample

The sample consists of fiction reviews published in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker Magazine* in 2007.<sup>4</sup> *The New York Times Book Review* is a weekly supplement to the daily newspaper and is readily identified as one of the most influential review outlets in the literary field (Alexander, 2003; Ekelund and Borjesson, 2002). *The New Yorker* is a weekly general interest magazine that regularly reviews fiction and features original prose by new and established literary talents. Both publications cater to demographically similar audiences; that is, well-educated and largely professional readerships.<sup>5</sup> Both are also general interest publications reaching a broad audience outside of the literary community. Therefore, how critics discuss the race and ethnicity of authors in these publications is likely to reflect understandings of racial and ethnic difference not limited to the literary field.

I analyze fiction reviews because the research question concerns how writers' race and ethnicity inform *aesthetic* judgments. Different fields possess unique logics for assessing value and it is less likely that writers' race or ethnicity would be used to assess non-fiction titles based on factual knowledge, such as books about astronomy or animals (Gans, 1979; Guetzkow et al., 2004; Lamont, 2009). After excluding non-fiction titles, children's books, anthologies, and reviews comparing more than one author, the final sample consisted of 265 reviews of books written by both foreign and American novelists.

#### 3.2. Analytic strategy

My analytic strategy was twofold. First, I identified how frequently critics mentioned writers' ethno-racial background in the reviews. Whenever critics located the writer as part of a racial, ethnic, national, or regional group, I counted this as an instance of ethno-racial "marking" or as a "marked" review (Waugh, 1982). Borrowed from linguistics, "marking" refers to the way social asymmetries are reflected in language (Waugh, 1982). For example, the dominant categories of "man" or "white", achieve a taken-for-granted status and thus go *unmarked*; whereas, their implied subordinates, such as "woman" or "nonwhite" are *marked* as special cases, different, or "Other" (Brubaker et al., 2006). Second, I used textual analysis to assess how critics used these markers to inform their literary discourse: when a reviewer described a novelist as an "African-American author", a "Danish novelist" or "a writer born in Mississippi", I aimed to make explicit the often implicit links made between these categorizations and the critics' broader construction of the text.<sup>6</sup>

Following Brubaker (2009; see also Brubaker et al., 2004), I treat racial, ethnic, national, and regional identifications as equivalent to the extent that they are categories and classifications people use to organize the social world. This is not to say that these categories are

<sup>4</sup> In April 2007, the *NYTBR* had one edition where they reviewed works that had been translated into English. Reviews from this special edition accounted for only 8 of the 265 reviews.

<sup>5</sup> This is based on readership profiles released as part of media kits and available from the publications websites. For *NYT*, see [http://www.nytimes.whsites.net/mediakit/pdfs/newspaper/MRI\\_NYTreaderprofile.pdf](http://www.nytimes.whsites.net/mediakit/pdfs/newspaper/MRI_NYTreaderprofile.pdf). For *The New Yorker*, see <http://www.condenastmediakit.com/nyr/circulation.cfm>.

<sup>6</sup> If critics used racial, ethnic, national, or regional categories to refer to something other than the writer (e.g., the anticipated readership for a book), then I did not count this as a marked review because my analytical focus is restricted to how the ethno-racial background of writers is mobilized for literary evaluation.

indistinguishable (see Calhoun, 1993; Cornell and Hartmann, 2004; Omi and Winant, 1994; Winant, 2000); however, the critics in my sample use racial, ethnic, national, and regional identifiers in similar ways which the forthcoming analysis makes clear. Thus, I use “ethno-racial” or “race and ethnicity” as an inelegant shorthand for “racial, ethnic, national, or regional” categories.

After several rounds of systematic reading, I discerned that critics used these ethno-racial identifiers to achieve three rhetorical ends: (i) to establish the authenticity of the novel, (ii) to classify the novel and novelist into ethnic genres, and (iii) to nominally identify international literary talent which are explained later in the paper.

The second stage of analysis involved comparing critics’ overall evaluation of the novels across the two groups of reviews. I coded for critics’ overall assessment of the novels (e.g. positive or mixed/negative) as well as the formal literary criteria reviewers commented upon (e.g. plot, prose, characterization, voice/tone and theme). I also coded for whether critics discussed formal features as strengths or weaknesses of the novel. This provided data on whether the presence of racial/ethnic identifiers increased or decreased the chance of a positive review and based on what criteria (see Appendix A of the online supplementary data for details on methodology).

#### 4. Attention to race and ethnicity in literary reviews

The first task of literary criticism is to select which titles to review. Table 1 summarizes the ethnic origins<sup>7</sup> of writers reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker* in 2007. The table also provides data on whether critics made mention of a writer’s race or ethnicity in their reviews.

Looking first at the amount of critical attention given to Western relative to non-Western-origin writers, it is clear that these US publications pay more attention to Western-fiction: 226 of the 265 reviews or just over four out of every five reviews in the sample were written about a Western-origin novelist. This is especially true for American writers who accounted for 60% of Western-origin authors and just over half (51%) of the entire sample. These findings corroborate research on the dynamics of the global literary market predicting that American critics will privilege homegrown literary talent and then fiction from countries with strong geo-linguistic ties to the United States (Berkers et al., forthcoming).

Regarding critical attention to authors’ race or ethnicity, I find that 81 of the 265 cases or roughly a third of the reviews contained any racial or ethnic identifiers. Among Western-origin writers, 27% or just under one out of every three reviews mentioned the race or ethnicity of the writer. Among the non-Western origin writers, 49% or approximately one out of every two reviews mentioned the writer’s ethnic or racial background. That critics’ mark writers from various ethnic-origin groups indicates that the qualitative findings are not driven by critics’ singular treatment of a specific group of writers (e.g., discussing the race and ethnicity of African-origin writers only).

<sup>7</sup> I conducted an online search of authors’ personal web pages, publishing house web pages, and other Internet sources to determine authors’ ethnic origins. Following Berkers et al. (forthcoming), I rely on authors’ nation of birth as an indicator of their ethnic origin group and further distinguish between writers of *western-ethnic origins* and *non-western ethnic origin* groups. Berkers, Janssen and Verboord distinguish the latter as including regions that are not historically rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions and typically have a majority language outside of the Indo-European linguistic family (e.g., Africa, East Asia, Middle-East, etc.).

Table 1  
Number of reviews mentioning race/ethnicity by authors' ethnic origins ( $N = 265$ ).

Author ethnic origins	Does critic mention writer's race/ethnicity in review?		
	Yes	No	Total
<b>Western</b>			
American	17	118**	135
Canadian	4	5	9
British	17	27	44
European	24**	11	35
Australian	0	3	3
Subtotal	62	164**	226
<b>Non-Western</b>			
Latin American	4	2	6
Middle Eastern	3	4	7
African	4	5	9
South Asian	2	4	6
East Asian	4	2	6
Caribbean (Greater Antilles)	2	3	5
Subtotal	19	20	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>184**</b>	<b>265</b>

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

\*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

Qualitative analysis of the reviews reveals that when critics did identify the race or ethnicity of a writer, it was discussed in one of three distinct ways which I explain in detail further below<sup>8</sup>:

- (i) to establish the authenticity of the novels ( $N = 37$ );
- (ii) to classify works into ethnic genres ( $N = 12$ );
- (iii) to identify international talent in interpretively nominal ways ( $N = 36$ ).

The sum of categories exceeds  $N = 81$  because where a review exhibited the use of race/ethnicity for two purposes (i.e., authenticity and ethnic genre classification) this review was counted twice.

*Establishing authenticity* is defined by critics' suggestion that a novel's contents were truthful or accurate because they were based on the novelist's own ethno-racial insider-knowledge. *Ethnic genres* are defined by critics' grouping together novels based on the shared ethno-racial backgrounds of the novelists. *Nominal identifications* are defined by critics identifying authors' race or ethnicity in passing but without using it as an interpretive tool—hence, marking in a purely “nominal” way. The first two modes of ethno-racial marking emphasize authors' racial and ethnic positions as salient for appreciating the novels, whereas the nominal category reminds us that this is not the only way critics use ethno-racial identifiers in reviews. The

<sup>8</sup> For an examination of how these frames are distributed across ethnic origin groups, see Appendix B in the online supplementary data.

relationship between these different frames is clarified through examples discussed in the next section.

## 5. Findings: establishing authenticity, ethnic genres, and nominal mentions

### 5.1. Establishing authenticity

The first way critics used authors' race and ethnicity was to suggest that the novel was authentic. Authenticity is a highly valued if ambiguous feature of artistic works. Often associated with sincerity, accuracy, truthfulness, and genuineness (Johnston and Baumann, 2007, 2009), authenticity is defined in relation to some idealized sets of expectations about the "real" essence of things (Grazian, 2003; Taylor, 1997:21). For example, Grazian's (2003) study of the Chicago blues scene revealed that audiences' evaluation of *authentic* blues music was informed as much by musicians' performance of their "blackness" as their technical skill. This demonstrates how authenticity is not an intrinsic quality but "fabricated" (Peterson, 1997) or "manufactured" (Grazian, 2003) through specific framing processes. One such framing process involves drawing connections between a cultural artifact (e.g., cuisine or music) and characteristics of identifiable cultural producers (e.g., chefs or musicians) (Grazian, 2003; Johnston and Baumann, 2007, 2009; Peterson, 1997; Taylor, 1997). I find that literary critics used similar framing techniques when discussing books.

A novel's authenticity relates to the perceived truthfulness or genuineness of the story being told (Griswold, 1987). One way critics established the authenticity of the novels was to draw parallels between the ethno-racial features of the writers and the ethno-racial features of the story (i.e. the foreign setting of the story or the race/ethnicity of the protagonist). Drawing such parallels suggested that authors were relying on their knowledge as ethno-racial insiders to inform the books. In other words, the novels were framed as expressions of their unique ethno-racial subject positions (Taylor, 1997); thus they are authentic because they are based on first-hand experiences rather than pure imagination.

In a review of Michael Thomas' *Man Gone Down* (Glover, 2007), the critic draws parallels between the author and the protagonist of the novel. *Man Gone Down* is described as telling the story of, "[a] Boston-bred black man living in Brooklyn and struggling to write while supporting his blue-blooded white wife and their three children" (Glover, 2007:1). Michael Thomas, the author, is then described as:

*A Boston-bred African-American writer who lives in Brooklyn with his wife and their three children, Thomas seems to have fully embraced the "write what you know" ethos. And what he knows is how the odds are stacked in America. He knows the unlikelihood of successful black fatherhood. He knows that things are set up to keep the Other poor and the poor in their place. More than anything else, he knows how little but also – fortunately – how much it can take to bring a man down. (Glover, 2007:8)*

The parallels drawn between the protagonist and the novelist are explicit: both are Boston-bred, African-American writers living in Brooklyn with their wife and three children. These similarities suggest that *Man Gone Down* is at least partly autobiographical. What is revealing is that the invocation of insider-knowledge, here rephrased as the "write what you know ethos", privileges Thomas' personal experience not as a father, not as a husband, not even as a writer, but as an African-American man in the United States and the obstacles he is assumed to have experienced as a member of this racial group. This suggests that part of the value of the novel is

that readers will be treated to an authentic depiction of what it is like to be an “Other” in a highly racialized society.<sup>9</sup>

Similar parallels are drawn when reviewing Ha Jin’s *A Free Life* (Kim, 2007). In the following excerpt, a critic for *The New York Times Book Review* emphasizes how the decisions and trajectory of Ha Jin’s own immigrant experience parallels the decisions and trajectory of his characters, the Wus:

*Much as Jin himself did, the Wus came from China to study, not to stay, but they realized after the Tiananmen Square massacre (as Jin did too, he’s said in interviews) that they couldn’t go home again and be themselves, since both their selves and their native land had changed. “A Free Life” is the story of their family’s naturalization. . . and like most novels of what professors call “The American Immigrant Experience,” it’s chiefly a tale of trial and error. (Kim, 2007:14)*

Identified as one of many narratives about the “American Immigrant Experience”,<sup>10</sup> the parallels drawn between the author and his characters again suggests that the writer is relying on his insider-knowledge as a Chinese migrant to the United States to inform the content of his book. And thus, his novel can be appreciated as an authoritative or authentic depiction of the trials and errors incumbent to the naturalization experience more generally since it is based on Jin’s own immigrant story.

Suggestions of the autobiographical nature of the novel persist even though Ha Jin has publicly denied that his work is autobiographical. A critic for the *New Yorker* dismisses the authors’ claim by using Jin’s dedication in *A Free Life* as further forensic evidence of the parallels between the author’s life and that of his characters:

*[The author] declared, “I plan to write at least two books about the American immigrant experience, but not my own story.” However, his dedication to “A Free Life” reads, “To Lisha and Wen, who lived this book”; Lisha and Wen are the names of Ha Jin’s wife and son. Nan Wu, the hero of “A Free Life,” also has a wife and son. . . (Updike, 2007:100)*

The efforts made to reveal Ha Jin’s novel as a thinly veiled literary depiction of his real-lived immigrant experience – taken with the emphasis on Michael Thomas’ novel as an authentic depiction of being an “Other” in America – suggest that the value of these novels is partly their edifying rather than aesthetic quality.

Sometimes critics stressed not authentic depictions of individual experiences, but authentic depictions of foreign settings by emphasizing authors’ first-hand knowledge or experience with these exotic locales. This was the case in a *New Yorker* review of the crime-novel *Sacred Games*, set in Bombay (Mishra, 2007). The critic provides an extended socio-political sketch of Bombay, and then praises the author, Vikram Chandra, for his unique ability to portray this complex setting. Chandra’s authentic portrayal is partially attributed to the fact that Chandra grew up in Bombay as a child:

<sup>9</sup> The apparent appeal of the “Other” in book reviews is akin to trends in world music as identified by Taylor (1997), whereby the authenticity of world music is often associated with specific positions (especially racialized, ethnicized, or subaltern identities), a romanticization of the traditional, and the purity of primal origins.

<sup>10</sup> This is also an example of genre-classification: “The American Immigrant Experience” does not refer to a specific ethnic or national group but is still consistent with the trend of rooting the value of a novel in its expressing the very particular social position of someone who has the experience of being an immigrant in the United States.

*But then Bombay itself has transformed rapidly in the past decade and a half—a period during which the city’s official name was changed to Mumbai—as India’s religious and political conflicts have finally caught up with the city’s traditionally business-minded and cosmopolitan communities. In December, 1992, during the nationwide riots that followed the demolition of a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists, hundreds of people in Bombay, mostly Muslims, were killed; retaliatory bomb attacks, allegedly masterminded by a Muslim don living in Dubai, killed nearly three hundred people, creating religious tensions among the hitherto secular fraternity of criminals. Though Bombay has prospered greatly from the liberalization of India’s state-controlled economy in the nineteen-nineties, it has also become home to feral forms of capitalism. In recent years, a series of scandals and scams have exposed an intricate network of greed, envy, and lust which binds politicians, tycoons, and civil servants to Mafia dons, Bollywood stars, and slumlords.*

*Such material—with its prodigies of arcane socioeconomic detail and suggestions of disorder—might appear overwhelming to a novelist. But Chandra – who grew up in Bombay and who now teaches creative writing at Berkeley, mines it confidently. (Mishra, 2007:100)*

In providing such a detailed portrait of Bombay’s incumbent political, religious, and economic transitions, the critic suggests that the value of *Sacred Games* is not simply the cop-criminal narrative but the fact that readers will be treated to an authentic rendering of what it is like to be in this exotic city (Griswold, 1992).<sup>11</sup> And readers can be confident in the authority of this depiction because, unlike other writers for whom such a setting would be “overwhelming,” Vikram Chandra has first-hand experience and insider-knowledge of the changing city having grown up there as a child. The idea that Chandra can write authoritatively about recent Hindu-Muslim tensions and economic corruption in Mumbai simply because he lived there as a child is based on essentialist ideas that ethno-racial minorities possess genuine ties and comprehensive knowledge about their foreign cultures<sup>12</sup> (Borjas, 1992; Esser, 2004; Kibria, 2000; Warikoo, 2007).

The above examples demonstrate how critics use authors’ race or ethnicity as a tool for constructing the authenticity of a novel. Marking authors’ race and ethnicity in this way can be seen as conferring a level of authority on the novel and novelist—but it is authority of a very narrow kind. Specifically, critics draw upon ideas about writers’ authority as “ethno-racial insiders”, which is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the assumption that authors possess authoritative or authentic ethnic knowledge based on such broad identity categories is rooted in primordial thinking about race and ethnicity (Kibria, 2000). Second, the suggestion that any of these novels, while rooted in the biographical details of the writer, can be appreciated as authoritative *group* representations (e.g., the African-American or the Immigrant experience) is based on a token logic whereby the writer is seen as representing his or her entire group (Kanter,

<sup>11</sup> The lengthy sketch of Mumbai also elevates the critics’ own cultural capital by demonstrating his cosmopolitan knowledge of the foreign city. The critic is therefore also in a more authoritative position to assess whether Chandra has done an adequate job of representing the vicissitudes of this complex setting.

<sup>12</sup> Race and ethnicity scholars note that there is the common assumption in the US that ethno-racial minorities retain enduring and authentic ties to their foreign culture—including an intimate knowledge of ethnic language, customs, and history independent of their generational status or how long they have lived in the US. Kibria (2000) refers to this as the assumption of “ethnic authenticity” spared most white-Americans whose ethnic ties are largely seen as more mutable, symbolic, or a matter of personal preference (see Gans, 1979; Lieberman and Waters, 1993, 1986).

1977). Thus, even though authenticity is used to valorize a novel, the basis of such authenticity reifies essentialist ideas of ethno-racial social difference (Grazian, 2003; Taylor, 1997). This emphasis on positioning writers as representatives of their ethno-racial group is also a central dynamic of ethnic-genre classifications.

## 5.2. *Classifying novel and novelist into ethnic genres*

The second way reviewers marked authors' race or ethnicity was to classify novels into ethnic genres. Genres refer to the socially constructed categories used to group works together based on "perceived similarities" (DiMaggio, 1987:441; Lena and Peterson, 2008). When the "perceived similarity" included authors' race or ethnicity, I identified this as an instance of ethnic-genre classification.

I begin by offering an example of a *non-ethnic* genre as a point of contrast which will make the distinction between this and an *ethnic* genre clearer. In the following example, a critic for the *New York Times* puts Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* in the subgenre of books that imagine what it must be like in Hell:

*It must be human nature to want to imagine hell, and to want to describe it to those with less vivid imaginations. From van Eyck to Dante, from Jonathan Edwards to Jean-Paul Sartre, artists have been only too happy to tell us exactly how hot the flames will be, and how exquisite our tortures. But it's mostly in the past century that a new circle of hell has emerged, in narratives ranging from "Mad Max" to "The Twilight Zone" to Cormac McCarthy's novel "The Road"—and now, "The Pesthouse". (Prose, 2007:8)*

Here, the critic has grouped together a number of books based on their thematic similarity of imagining Hell. The critic then goes on to identify individual novels and novelists (including Dante, Jean Paul Sartre, and Cormac McCarthy) alongside the writer under review who are seen as fitting this genre. And finally, the reviewer suggests that these novelists' literary preoccupation with imagining Hell must be part of human nature.

Consider now an example of an *ethnic* genre. In a review of Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, the critic locates the novel within the genre of West African fiction which shares an emotional tone of "existential despair":

*The defining emotion of the West African novel seems to be existential despair. From Chinua Achebe's stories of corruption and social collapse to Ken Saro-Wiwa's Nigerian child soldier Sozaboy, a vein of pervasive hopelessness runs through the writing of a region that has witnessed the slide of postindependence dreams into civil war and chaos. . . "Measuring Time," Habila's accomplished second novel, overlays this tradition of despair with a self-consciously mythic plot. . . (Kunzru, 2007:21)*

As with the non-ethnic genre example, the critic has grouped together a number of novels based on some perceived similarity: an emotional tone of existential despair. And once again, the critic has identified individual novels and novelists that fit into this subgenre. What distinguishes this as an example of *ethnic* genre classification are the two following points: First, the authors identified are co-ethnic writers; that is, writers who share Helon Habila's West African background. Second, unlike the previous example where the literary similarities between writers

were attributed to human nature more generally, here the writers' similarities are seen as symptomatic of their shared West African heritage.<sup>13</sup>

A similar attribution is made when discussing Laura Restrepo's novel, *Delirium*, which is identified as part of the larger ethnic genre of Latin American literature. Restrepo is described as "invoking the spirits of Juan Rulfo, José Donoso, Manuel Puig and many others: all those orchestra conductors of collective memory" (Raffety, 2007:9). Once again, the critic groups together several co-ethnic writers who evince some literary similarity—in this case, a shared interest in memory. And beyond simply locating Restrepo within this Latin American genre, the critic suggests that Restrepo's preoccupation with the themes of madness and memory is attributable to her membership in this group:

*Laura Restrepo writes about Colombia, her native land. . . The restoration of the forgotten, the ignored, the barely known past has in fact been the great project of Latin American literature, the proof of its writers' ambivalent love for their suffering countries. The fiction of Latin America is full, as this book is, of painful recollections, whispered confidences, a multitude of voices testifying (sometimes, it seems, under duress) to the things they've seen and never told. (Raffety, 2007:9)*

Similar to the example of West African fiction, Restrepo's thematic explorations of collective memory are identified as responding to the imperative of the "great project of Latin American literature" more generally. This contrasts with the alternative interpretation that Restrepo's decision to write about memory was simply one of many creative choices she made as an individual writer.

Reviewers' discussion of the "despair" characterizing West African fiction and the "restoration of the forgotten" in Latin American fiction are intimately tied with socio-political and historical circumstances of these regions. In this way, ethnic-genre books can be understood as cultural artifacts of these regions and appreciated as a way of "knowing" these different societies through its fiction. Griswold (1992) makes this point when describing the Nigerian "village novel" genre as a tool for Western audiences to imagine a foreign and distant community albeit in an overly romanticized and distorted way.

Sometimes critics pointed out how writers did *not* fit into their normative ideas about what writing from particular ethnic genres was like. For example, in a review of Vladimir Sorokin's English-translation of *Ice*, the critic notes: "*In his frigid antihumanism, Sorokin parts company with Russian satirists like Gogol, Bulgakov, Yuri Olesha and, more recently, Viktor Pelevin*" (Kalfus, 2007:25). Similarly, when reviewing Danish novelist, Christian Jungersen's *The Exception*, the critic comments that he "cannot think of anything quite like [this novel]" and that Jungersen "stakes out a path all his own" when compared to "Scandinavian writing in the postwar years. . . much of it. . . minimalist, and not in a good way" (Frank, 2007:86). Even though the novels and novelists are discussed in terms of how they do not conform to the critics' idea of Russian satire or Scandinavian minimalism, it is significant that the writers are still held accountable to and contextualized against what their co-ethnic counterparts have been producing.

<sup>13</sup> The critic's description of post-independence existential despair can also be seen as an extension of the "things fall apart" theme identified by Griswold (1992) as a convention of the Nigerian "village novel" subgenre. Griswold explains that the narrative arc of these novels often involves a romanticized depiction of village life disturbed by some external intervention after which "things fall apart". In Chinua Achebe's novel of the same name, idyllic village life is disrupted by colonialism. In the critic's description of *Measuring Time*, idealistic hopes for post-independence life are disrupted by civil war.

In summary, critics sometimes marked authors' race or ethnicity to classify them into ethnic genres. The significance of this analytic category is that when classified in this way, the novels—whether it be in terms of what the authors are writing about (i.e., themes) or how they are writing (i.e., style)—are interpreted as artifacts of their particular ethno-racial heritages. This is another instance where critics frame authors' race and ethnicity as integral to understanding the meaning and value of the novels which contrasts greatly with nominal identifications where race and ethnicity is mentioned but has no interpretive significance.

### 5.3. Identifying international writers in interpretively nominal ways

The third way critics marked authors' race and ethnicity was in a nominal way. I use the term “nominal” to indicate that when critics mentioned authors' race or ethnicity, they did so in passing and in interpretively inert ways: that is, these identifiers were not used to interpret the novels in any way. This point is made clearer by looking at specific examples.

In the following excerpts, critics clearly identify writers as Irish, Canadian, and American, respectively, but in neither the quotes nor the larger review did critics suggest that these ethno-racial backgrounds inform how authors wrote or what they wrote about:

*Long drawn to silence, the Irish novelist Patrick McCabe is generally content to let the spaces between his words speak louder than the words themselves.* (Cowles, 2007:19)

\*\*\*

*Although this is the award-winning Canadian poet [Karen Connelly] and travel writer's first novel, her writing is muscular and taut, bringing inmates and warders fully alive.* (Adams, 2007:6)

\*\*\*

*Alexander Theroux, the younger of Paul Theroux's two older brothers, is one of America's premier frotteurs, to use a French term the impeccable James Salter applies to someone who “rubs words in his hand”.* (Bowman, 2007:12)

Because authors' race and ethnicity were not seen as directly influencing their creative choices, the authors' race and ethnicity were also not made relevant to interpreting the value or significance of their novels. Analysis reveals, however, that nominal identifications often were accompanied by reference to the authors' literary accomplishments.

Returning to the excerpts above as examples, in the same review of Patrick McCabe, the critic later notes that his previous novel, *The Butcher Boy*, was turned into a film and was a finalist for the prestigious Booker Prize. Canadian writer, Karen Connelly is noted to be an “award-winning” poet. And Alexander Theroux is located as part of the literary dynasty of Theroux brothers, and is identified as “America's premier frotteur”. Sometimes critics explicitly identified writers as among the top literary talents on an international stage: for example, Cees Nooteboom is described as “a cerebral, experimental writer renowned in his native Netherlands (indeed throughout Europe) and consistently on the shortlist of Nobel Prize candidates” (Barbash, 2007:20); Jim Crace as a “much admired British writer” (Oates, 2007:84); and William Trevor is given the rare honor of being described as an “Irish Chekhov” (Boyd, 2007:10).

Even though such nominal identifications may not communicate anything about how to understand the novel, identifying writers in these ways can help motivate the review by signaling to readers that the review is written about someone of literary interest or importance.<sup>14</sup> The review of William Trevor is not about just any other novel or novelist but a non-domestic talent who is also made equivalent to Chekov.

That critics pair interpretively nominal identifiers with mentions of literary accomplishment counters the idea that ethno-racial labels in reviews are necessarily an epithet one transcends with greater literary achievement. In other words, to be identified as an “ethnic-writer” does not necessarily preclude one’s recognition as a high-quality literary fiction writer. It is worth noting, however, that nominal identification is almost exclusively the privilege of Western-origin writers: 34 out of 36 (or 94% of) the nominally identified writers were Western writers (see Appendix B of the online supplementary data). This means that it was highly unlikely that critics would bring up a writer’s non-Western origins without using it as a way to interpret and evaluate the significance of their books.<sup>15</sup>

#### 5.4. Summary and discussion of reviewing trends

In the preceding sections, I have sought to empirically demonstrate how literary critics discursively incorporate authors’ race and ethnicity into their book reviews. Specifically, I have shown that critics use racial and ethnic identifiers to (i) establish the authenticity of their books; (ii) classify novels and novelists into ethnic genres; and (iii) identify writers in an interpretively nominal way.

When critics mentioned authors’ race or ethnicity to construct their novels as authentic, they emphasized authors’ position as “ethno-racial insiders” possessing unique insights and experiences they then transferred onto the pages of their books. When critics classified authors into ethnic genres they often suggested that the perceived literary similarities uniting writers were in some way emblematic or artifacts of their shared ethno-racial background. And the finding of nominal marking is a contrastive category because in these cases critics identify a writer’s race or ethnicity not to suggest anything about how to appreciate the novel but as a way of identifying interesting or important authors to motivate the reviews.

Based on these findings I argue that these critics are engaged in an interpretive strategy of *reading difference*. Again, interpretive strategies refer to “framing devices” that focus readers’ attention and appreciation of texts (Corse and Griffin, 1997:196). When critics discuss authors’ race and ethnicity in reviews, they often use it a criterion for constructing the value of the work for its relation to specific ethno-racial experiences or expression of ethno-racial literary sensibilities. The emphasis on how novels correspond to or are embedded in some actual social location echoes the stance of historicist literary criticism that treats socio-political context as meaningful for literary interpretation; though such an interpretive strategy does not preclude consideration of the formal literary merits of the novels or novelists, as the practice of nominal marking reveals. The next question, then, concerns what implications this interpretive strategy has for critics’ overall evaluation of the literary works.

<sup>14</sup> Preliminary data from interviews with book critics suggests that some reviewers believe including such information about the writer can help pique the interests of readers and draw them into the review.

<sup>15</sup> What is driving this empirical finding is unclear and not resolvable based on the small number of nominally identified reviews ( $N = 36$ ) in the study. Future research could examine whether the disproportionate application of nominal identifications to Western-origin writers persists in a larger sample that would yield fruitful insights on geo-political boundaries in literature.

## 6. Race, ethnicity, and overall literary evaluation

I now turn to examine how “reading difference” relates to critics’ final verdicts about the books under review. First, I consider whether the presence of ethno-racial identifiers increases or decreases the odds of receiving a favorable or unfavorable review. Second, I consider how reviews that mention an author’s race or ethnicity may differ in terms of the formal literary criteria used to evaluate the text.

### 6.1. Evaluation

High-brow cultural forms like literature usually resist simple good-bad evaluations because they are treated as complex and multifaceted (Baumann, 2007b). Book reviewers generally did not simply pronounce the success or failure of a novel, but led the reader through a novel’s strengths and weaknesses to justify their overall literary judgment.

I compare the overall evaluation found in book reviews that do or do not mention authors’ race or ethnicity in Table 2. The evaluation indicator compares favorable with mixed or unfavorable reviews. When a review is favorable, this means that the critic had mostly positive things to say about the novel: there may be a few criticisms, but overall the reviewer seems to recommend the novel. The unfavorable and mixed category refers to reviews which may include a few positive comments but overall the critic does not seem to recommend the novel to readers.

Table 2  
Critics’ overall evaluation in reviews with/without ethno-racial identifiers ( $N = 265$ ).

Evaluation	Does critic mention race or ethnicity in review?		Total
	Yes	No	
Favorable	43 (53%)	79 (43%)	122 (46%)
Mixed or unfavorable	38 (47%)	105 (57%)	143 (54%)
Total	81 (100%)	184 (100%)	265 (100%)

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

\*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

I find that in 53% of the cases where critics identified the race or ethnicity of the novelist, they also gave the novel a favorable review. Similarly, 43% of unmarked cases also received a favourable review.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, when critics marked the race or ethnicity of writers in their reviews, it made no significant difference in how they assessed the overall quality of the novels. But what about the literary criteria used to arrive at this broader evaluation?

### 6.2. Literary criteria

Critics often made evaluative statements about plot, prose, characters, voice/tone, and the themes explored in the novel. I compare how frequently reviewers discuss specific literary

<sup>16</sup> Additional analysis in Appendix C (see online supplementary data) shows that even though authenticity is by definition a positive trait, this did not mean that every time a reviewer framed the novel as authentic that it received a favorable review. And while a book may be framed as representative of or deviating from a particular genre-type, writing in either direction was not equated with an overall positive evaluation of the book.

Table 3  
Literary criteria evaluated in reviews with/without ethno-racial identifiers ( $N = 265$ ).

Literary criterion	Does critic mention race or ethnicity in review?		Total
	Yes	No	
Plot	52 (64%)	131 (71%)	183 (69%)
Characterization	50 (62%)	123 (67%)	173 (65%)
Theme	34 (42%)	102 (55%)*	136 (51%)
Voice/tone	53 (65%)**	71 (39%)	124 (47%)
Prose	47 (58%)*	73 (40%)	120 (45%)

\*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

criteria in reviews that mark author race or ethnicity and those that do not yielding some interesting patterns summarized in Table 3.

Reviewers were equally likely to discuss the merits of plot and characterization regardless of whether or not they mentioned the race or ethnicity of the writer. This is unsurprising since a coherent plot and plausible characters are minimal requirements for any successful narrative regardless of genre, audience, or what we know about the author. Critics were significantly more likely, however, to remark upon voice/tone and prose in reviews where they also marked the writer's race or ethnicity.

Again, prose refers to the technicalities of writing including how writers construct their sentences, the rhythm of their writing, and their particular word choices. Voice and tone generally refer to the “authorial presence” in the novel and the attitude towards a subject conveyed through the writing, which can be ironic, serious, arrogant, sentimental, etc. (Abrams, 1993). Theme, in contrast, refers to what overall message or idea is contained in the novel and is significantly less likely to be remarked upon in reviews that also mentioned the race/ethnicity of the writer.

Table 4 compares critics evaluation of specific literary criterion (i.e. as a strength or weakness of the book) in reviews that mention authors' race or ethnicity and those that do not. The data show no significant differences across the two groups of reviews: While critics were more likely to single out theme and prose as strengths of the books they were reviewing, this was equally true regardless of whether the review mentioned the author's ethno-racial background. Therefore,

Table 4  
Critical assessment of literary criteria in reviews with/without ethno-racial identifiers ( $N = 265$ ).

Literary criterion	Does critic mention race or ethnicity in review?			
	Yes		No	
	Strength <sup>a</sup>	Weakness	Strength	Weakness
Plot	34 (52%)	32 (48%)	80 (51%)	76 (49%)
Characterization	22 (42%)	31 (58%)	71 (49%)	73 (51%)
Theme	32 (58%)*	23 (42%)	63 (57%)*	47 (43%)
Voice/tone	32 (56%)	25 (44%)	43 (56%)	34 (44%)
Prose	35 (63%)**	21 (37%)	55 (70%)**	24 (30%)

<sup>a</sup> Numbers exceed totals reported in Table 4 because when a critic commented upon both strengths and weaknesses of the characterization in a novel, for example, each comment was counted as “1” in the strength and weakness categories.

\*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed  $t$ -test).

even though reviewers pay more critical attention to some literary features when they identify writers as ethnic-authors, the criteria themselves are not judged differently.

### 6.3. Summary and discussion of evaluation trends

While the presentation of racial and ethnic identifiers does not significantly increase or decrease the chance of a favorable review in my sample, I find that critics do appear to be attending to slightly different criteria across the two groups of reviews. In reviews where critics make no mention of a writer's race or ethnicity, reviewers are more likely to comment upon the content or perceived theme of the novel. When critics identify the race or ethnicity of the writer, they are more likely to pay critical attention to voice/tone and prose of the novel.

Both voice/tone and prose are intimately tied with the persona of the author as the “voice behind the fictitious voices” (Abrams, 1993:156). This is consistent with the qualitative data demonstrating that when critics use authors' race or ethnicity, it is to frame the novels as rooted in unique social positions as represented by the author: these literary criteria emphasize the author's presence in the text in terms of not *what* is written, but *how*.

## 7. Conclusion and discussion

This study has illuminated how critics use authors' race and ethnicity as tools for appraising the value of contemporary literary fiction using an interpretive strategy I term *reading difference*. This involves engaging with a cultural text, in this case novels, in ways that emphasize how it relates to the actual racial, ethnic, national, or regional position of their creators both in terms of the content explored and the way it is formally crafted.

The significance of race and ethnicity for classifying and interpreting fiction has been discussed elsewhere (Berkers, 2009; Griswold, 1987). But what the present analysis adds is an awareness of how classifying writers within racial, ethnic, or national categories is *constitutive* of the value assigned to their work through the strategy of reading difference. I find that when critics identify writers in ethnic or racial terms, they do so to position authors as ethno-racial “insiders” emphasizing a book's authenticity; to frame the novels as artifacts of particular ethno-racial cultures through the concept of ethnic genres; or to pique readers' interest in the author and in reading the review. Content analysis further reveals that critics focus on different stylistic issues when reviewing these ethno-rationally classified writers.

Whether this approach to fiction is “better” or more “correct” than any other is not a concern of this paper. This line of debate has been going on within literary circles for over a hundred years (Adams, 1988; Patterson, 1995). The contribution of this analysis has been to demonstrate how the perceived racial and ethnic background of cultural producers is a critical component of the assessment and evaluation of cultural products that has not been empirically demonstrated before.

Of course, the impact of racial and ethnic categories for literary valuation is not limited to the moment of book reviewing but permeates different stages of the production process—including when publishers decide how to market specific titles and when media outlets decide which books to review (Berkers et al., forthcoming); and these are in turn influenced by the prevailing market logics of the literary publishing field (Berkers, 2009; Dowd, 2003). One limitation of the analysis data is the inability to isolate how these different factors come to bear on how race and ethnicity is discussed in the final print reviews. An area for future study, then, is to provide a more holistic account of how racial and ethnic discourse in reviews may be influenced by other production factors and marketing classifications (Dowd, 2003).

The contributions of the analysis also point to other avenues for future research. First, I have demonstrated that the use of racial and ethnic identifiers by newspaper and magazine critics may not greatly influence the odds of receiving a favorable or unfavorable review; but what about in other branches of literary criticism? Newspaper and magazine critics are the first line of gatekeepers, but attracting the positive attention of literary essayists and academics is necessary for a novel to be valorized as a high-culture and high-quality piece of fiction (van Rees, 1983). Future research could investigate the extent to which novels and writers framed as authentic or as ethnic-genre authors are consecrated in these other forms of literary criticism. Second, because many of the marked reviews discuss foreign or otherwise minority social positions, this suggests that the fiction of groups whose voices or experiences are constructed as “Other” are more likely to be appreciated through the lens of reading difference though no firm conclusions could be drawn from the data here. Investigating whether the cultural works of Other-ed groups are evaluated differently from the works of majority producers is another worthy question for future research.

It would also be most illuminating to examine to what extent the ways I have identified literary critics’ use of authors’ race and ethnicity as tools for critical appraisal can be extended to critics in other cultural fields. For example, does the critical significance of race or ethnicity function in the same way for painting and dance as it does for fiction? Arriving at such knowledge would greatly push our understanding of the social mechanisms undergirding valuation processes and points to the more general research agenda of building a better theory of cultural valuation.

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### Appendices A through C. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2010.11.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2010.11.003).

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