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by Jason Richards

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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European imperial culture. As Richards's analyses of Brown's *Edgar Huntly* ( ) and Cooper's *The Pioneers* ( ) illustrate, playing Indian enables whites to perform an authentic, indigenous identity, symbolic of freedom and resistance against British colonialism, and therefore different from European culture. And yet, while imitating Native Americans, whites were also colonizing and exterminating them through aggressive territorial expansion. For example, as Richards eloquently puts it, "Edgar [Brown's protagonist] exemplifies the paradox and privilege of redface performance: he imitates while repressing the Indian, goes native while executing the agenda of white colonial supremacy" ( ). Authors such as Irving and Melville resort to blackface culture to Americanize their works and challenge the fiction behind white American nationalism. Whites compensated for their feelings of inadequacy through blackface by absorbing the virility and cool associated with blacks at the same time that they ridiculed blackness by relying on minstrel stereotypes. Thus, white personal and national self-discovery and affirmation are realized through ambiguous red- and blackface performances.

One of Richards's most poignant interpretations is his multilayered examination of racial performance in "Benito Cereno" ( ). He reads Babo, the seemingly devoted servant in Melville's story, as engaging not only in blackface but also whiteface. Babo thus becomes a perfect example of the subversive potential behind mimicry, when he "mocks and menaces colonial hegemony not only by playing the obedient slave but by imitating colonial

that the racially ambivalent portrait of George Washington has throughout the novel is truly fascinating.

The last chapter of *Imitation Nation* focuses on “how the earliest African American novelists resist, revise, and retaliate against minstrelsy’s various aggressions and how their reprisals register the emotional, cultural, and historical damage wrought by minstrelsy” ( ). By reappropriating minstrelsy and turning its violence against white authority figures, authors such as William Wells Brown, Hannah Crafts, Frank Webb, and Martin Delany mock the illusion of white purity, destabilize racial hierarchies, and develop a new black narrative tradition that opens up the national conversation about race, slavery, and transnationalism. Crafts’s *The Bondswoman Narrative* (ca. ) is the only work mentioned in which a black female character subjects a white female character (and by extension her family, as well as their proslavery interests in the North) to the humiliation and emotional violence inflicted on African Americans in the blackface tradition. All the other main characters on which Richards builds his argument are male.

Nevertheless, Richards’s references to homoerotic, interracial desire in the male-centered narratives included in *Imitation Nation* will catch the attention of those interested in gender studies and masculinity formation. After all, behind red- and blackface performance lies the fetishizing of Indian and black bodies. White fascination with Indian and black manhood leads to the inhabiting and consumption of Indian and black bodies through racial imitation, as Richards demonstrates.

Jason Richards persuasively unveils the ambivalent and imitative nature of American identity and literature, built in response to the racial and cultural anxieties that haunt the nation. *Imitation Nation* is, undoubtedly, a must-read for those interested in critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and American literary nationalism.

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