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Imitation Nation: Red, White, and Blackface in Early and Antebellum US Literature by Jason Richards (review)

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Early American Literature, Volume 54, Number 2, 2019, pp. 537-542 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2019.0041>



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portant one that adds to efforts to link indigenous and African-descended peoples with the intellectual development of the Atlantic world (20).

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*Imitation Nation: Red, White, and Blackface
in Early and Antebellum US Literature*

JASON RICHARDS

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017

256 pp.

For decades, scholars have been expanding the geographic and temporal lenses through which they study “American” identities, cultures, and texts. The logic of this reconsideration is simple and sound: the notion of an autochthonous, independent US literature and culture is inaccurate and, at bottom, in bad faith. What this project lacks in freshness, it makes up for in continued relevance. Decades after the transnational shift began, American exceptionalism and its tangle of assumptions persist. Indeed, the remapping of identities and relationships is a vast imaginative effort, one of several generations, in the very least.

This long reevaluation requires textured analysis and new conceptual frameworks. In *Imitation Nation: Red, White, and Blackface in Early and Antebellum US Literature*, Jason Richards offers both. Triangulating modes of inquiry, Richards studies hiding-in-plain-sight relationships among white Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and white Europeans. For example, Richards combines insights from scholarship on blackface minstrelsy with those gleaned from settler postcolonial theory to bring Natty Bumppo’s native and African American mimesis into sharp focus. This approach to James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1823) reveals the dependence of American whiteness on Native American, African American, and British Anglo-Saxon identities. Exploring new relationships among established schools of thought, Richards provides a model for redressing the insularity that has long shaped conceptions of US history, literature, and culture.

Richards borrows from nineteenth-century social theorist Gabriel Tarde, who viewed imitation, not essence, as the basis of identity. Tarde’s

notion that identity is contingent on one's response to others is particularly suggestive in the early American and antebellum contexts. As Richards notes, the theater's rapid growth in the early Republic reflected a longing for national culture keyed to an implicit understanding that American-ness would be achieved through imitation, specifically, through embodying and absorbing Native American, African American, and European identities. Engaging the work of Philip J. Deloria, Eric Lott, and Robert S. Levine, Richards delineates mutually constitutive relationships among diverse acts of cross-racial, cross-Atlantic mimesis. *Imitation Nation* makes an important contribution to the scholarship of blackface minstrelsy. But because mimesis took place offstage, too, Richards conceptualizes redface and blackface broadly to cover a range of cross-racial imitations.

While mimesis occurs wherever contact happens, it assumed particularly robust form in a new republic defined by remarkable diversity and dominated by descendants of white Europe who faced the unusual problem of defining themselves as, at once, white and not European. A unique postcolonial settler society, the early United States sought the temporal depth and legitimacy associated with aboriginal Indian identity, but it also imitated Britain's imperial dominance over nonwhite groups. *Imitation Nation* makes a compelling case that American identity emerged in the complex interplay of western and Atlantic frontiers. Literature helped shape national identity in this push-pull fashion: European models distinguished the white United States from its Native American and African American inhabitants, and these Others helped distinguish American literature and identity from European antecedents. This dynamic set at odds preoccupations with racial purity and American distinctiveness. That is, a distinctive white national identity required absorbing and excluding racial and cultural Others at the same time.

Citing Homi K. Bhabha's idea of mimicry from *The Location of Culture*, Richards opens a space for nonwhite agency in the production of national identity. Through mimicry, the disenfranchised, colonized, and enslaved exploit the slippage between the identities hegemonic regimes enforce and those same identities as performed by the oppressed. Mimicry and cross-cultural imitation, more broadly, energize what Richards calls "hybridity, the inevitable offspring of mimesis" (31). *Imitation Nation* sets the reality of hybridity against the fiction of white purity, as Richards argues: "If the colonial apparatus stabilized itself through a fiction of racial

purity, the fact of hybridity cut through the homogenous myth, opening the door to a more democratic postcolonial future" (31). A robust conception of hybridity leads Richards to rehabilitate, if guardedly, the notion of "cultural melting"; indeed, he stops just short of reviving the "melting pot" trope (27). Richards's accounts of the identities that emerge through cross-racial imitation range from insightful to brilliant, and his argument that nonwhite groups shaped American identity is incontrovertible. There is, nevertheless, room to question the quality of a multiculturalism that emerges through redface and blackface.

Imitation Nation is divided into two halves: the first three chapters examine "formative iterations of literary red, white, and blackface" in the early national period (33). The second three study racial imitation in the antebellum period, focusing on the 1850s. The first chapters show that cross-racial imitation was fundamental to Americanness from the start. For example, chapter 2 notes that Washington Irving's personae attribute their best-known tales to a black miller storyteller, who makes scattered appearances in Irving's oeuvre. Richards argues compellingly that Irving's 1808 account of a black Haitian dancer named Tucky Squash is, in fact, the earliest instance of American literary blackface, a remarkable claim. This seminal appropriation of black cachet anticipates the ambivalence of blackface minstrelsy, as Irving relocates dance styles developed on the docks of Manhattan and Long Island to Haiti, as if to keep blackness at arm's length.

Chapters 1 and 3, on Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799) and Cooper's *The Pioneers*, respectively, argue that American identity emerged in the dynamic interplay of the nation's western and Atlantic frontiers. Richards explores the relationship between Edgar Huntly's much remarked "Indian transformation" and Brown's search for an aboriginal identity position that might leverage cultural independence from Britain (38). Brown calls for a truly original American literature in *Edgar Huntly*'s preface, but his novel dramatizes the impossibility of ex nihilo creation. As Richards shows, Brown realized that American literature would depend on British forms, tropes, and conventions. Accordingly, Brown represents the American landscape, frontier and all, as a palimpsest, with the United States figured atop previous maps. Huntly is at home in this geography of revaluation, as Richards argues: "the European and Indian are collapsed together in Edgar Huntly: the white American who, like the white American republic, is culturally red and European" (62). Movement toward both

the Atlantic and western frontiers leads to American hybridity, not the ahistorical purity of exceptionalism. The equally rich chapter on Cooper's *The Pioneers* conceptualizes Natty Bumppo in similar terms. Because Bumppo crystallizes the emergence of American identity through imitation, I quote at length here:

American identity is actually an accumulation of racial, cultural, and historical imitations, counter-imitations, and accretions that clash and converge in a fascinating hybridity. . . . [Bumppo collapses] the oppressed Indian, oppressed Saxon, oppressed slave with America's oppressive Anglo-Saxon racial ideology. He epitomizes the myth of the white republic and the racial mixture that subverts that myth. He epitomizes how white Americans could identify as victims in the same moment they became victimizers. (106)

Richards concedes that the novel's master narrative climaxes with Anglo-Saxon racial destiny sacralized in cross-Atlantic marriage, as several critics have argued. But he posits a second narrative, "[c]oncealed in the subtext, so as not to alienate [Cooper's] readers" (107). Instantiated by racial ambiguity and affectionate cross-racial imitation, this narrative relates an inclusive vision of American identity. One possible objection to this reading is that it relies on three separate arguments about the nonwhiteness of putatively white characters, including Elizabeth Temple, Oliver Edwards, and Bumppo. If Richards's conclusion is speculative, the path he takes to reach it is revealing at every step.

The second half of *Imitation Nation* focuses on cross-racial imitations constellated around blackface minstrelsy. Chapter 4 examines African American characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) who seek agency by wearing blackface masks. Richards's discussion of George Harris, the revolutionary, is especially incisive. Harris blacks up to pass as white so that he can go to Africa to pass as black. This discussion counterpoints chapter 6, a fine reading of counterminstrel scenes in three black antebellum novels: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (c. 1857), Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), and Martin Delany's *Blake* (1859–62). Crafts and Webb dramatize the precariousness of whiteness in scenes that feature white characters compelled to wear blackface masks. Delany signifies powerfully on well-known minstrel songs to connect the grim realities of slavery to the violence of minstrelsy, a rela-

tionship he drives home in a heart-wrenching scene of compelled minstrel performance. The detail and nuance of Richards's analysis is exquisite. His comparison of Blake's and George Harris's mimetic resistance throws new light on each text.

Bookended by these contrapuntal chapters is a powerful reading of "Benito Cereno" (1855) that builds on the work of Eric Sundquist, W. T. Lhamon, Jr., and others to read the *San Dominick* as "a virtual minstrel stage" on which Melville enacts "one of the most complex and rigorous indictments of blackface in all antebellum literature" (150, 148). In the text's overlaid oppositions—North-South, United States–Europe, master-Slave, republican-aristocrat, black-white—Richards discerns "the intensely hybrid nature of national and global identities, a hybridity that disrupts fictions of cultural and racial purity that were central to preserving colonial hegemony" (153).

This discussion of "Benito Cereno" encapsulates the considerable strengths of *Imitation Nation*. Further, its ultimate focus on disruptive hybridity suggests something important about the volume's interpretative vantage and its attendant conception of US history. For Richards, the antebellum "drive for white American purity [represents] an anxious response to the radical hybridity that threatens the agenda of territorial expansion and slavery as well as America's attempt to consolidate itself as an independent imperial power" (33). White nationalism, in this construction, is beset by the very nature of identity formation. *Imitation Nation* helps redefine American literature, its history, geography, and players by telling the story of real-world hybridity's erosion of racial purity. For identity to happen, imitation must, and hybridity necessarily follows. In any diverse context, this process beggars claims to purity. In the United States, Richards asserts, "the imitative gestures of Native, white, and African Americans produced what was, in reality, the cross-racial, cross-cultural fabric of the new nation" (12). If white nationalism predicated on racial and cultural purity is the loser in Richards's account of US history, the winner is multiculturalism.

Because Richards is most interested in addressing American exceptionalism and its white nationalist roots, *Imitation Nation* is primarily concerned with highlighting the role of mimesis in multicultural identity formation. It is arguably true, however, that those who held power did not so much fear hybridity as use it. After all, hybridity and the threat of hybridity continue to give the politics of purity its bite. This is not a criti-

cism of *Imitation Nation*, as Richards consistently describes hybridity and ambivalence as twin products of cross-racial mimesis. Without contradiction, then, Richards's account of unsustainable white purity collapsing into multiculturalism doubles as the story of power's adaptability. *Imitation Nation* offers insight into white nationalism's capacity to outlive its founding fictions. Although Richards emphasizes a liberatory arc of racial purity eroded and overcome through its very acts of becoming, a careful reading of *Imitation Nation* reveals another national narrative, an etiology of white nationalism, an account of how whiteness and its beneficiaries have adaptively absorbed nonwhite identities over time.

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Ties That Bound: Founding First Ladies and Slaves

MARIE JENKINS SCHWARTZ

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017

416 pp.

Marie Jenkins Schwartz does a great service by making a weighty and difficult topic accessible to general readers. She endeavors to fill a gap both in the public consciousness and the historical record of some of the most famous early leaders in American history we think we know so well: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. We know they held slaves, but what did their wives think about that?

The answer is in the title of the study itself. While the ties that bound slaves may have been more overt, the ties that bound the wives of early slaveholders were a lot less obvious. Without letting anyone off the hook, Schwartz reveals why these women were able to disregard their own consciences and look the other way—even when the slaves held in bondage were their own blood relatives. Not surprisingly, it comes down to money and a set of cultural conventions that were hard to break. To read this book closely is to remember that privilege for some has always come at a cost to others.

Schwartz begins each part by outlining just how much wealth was required to maintain the grand lifestyle of our earliest presidents. While most Americans think of George Washington as a down-to-earth Patriot, he