

Jason Richards, *Imitation Nation: Red, White, and Blackface in Early and Antebellum US Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 244 pp.

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In August 2019, 400 years after the first enslaved people arrived in colonial Virginia, the *New York Times* launched *The 1619 Project*. Comprised of essays, poems, short fiction, and photographs, this project is designed above all to demonstrate the instrumental role that slavery played in the founding of the nation. As Jamelle Bouie, one of the project's contributors, explains in a *Times* editorial from August 23, *The 1619 Project* aims to illustrate how the "culture, economy, politics and social relations" of the US "are inextricably bound in the race-based chattel slavery that would emerge in Virginia and spread throughout the colonies." While we have long recognized that slavery was something with which the founders contended, we have failed to recognize the defining role the institution played in the evolution of national tenets. The suggestion has long been, in short, that American principles of freedom and individual autonomy emerged *despite* slavery; *The 1619 Project*, however, wants us to understand that those principles took the precise shape they did *because* of slavery. And since slavery itself was written into the very fabric of the nation, it remains a part of that fabric, in very real ways, today.

While not focused on the institution of slavery per se, Jason Richards's thoughtful study, *Imitation Nation*, shares with *The 1619 Project* an interest in how race has shaped and defined US identity. Richards too seeks to excavate the racial roots of America's (cultural and literary) history, to explore how "white national identity," and the literature that represents it, has been wrought by the racial dynamics of the early nation (1). He thus launches his study with a provocative rhetorical question: "If we could subtract European, Native, and African influence from the new nation, what would we be left with? Would there be any national culture at all?" (1-2).

The answer to this last question is, of course, no, as Richards proceeds to demonstrate through lively readings of texts ranging from Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799) to Martin Delany's *Blake* (1859). In recent decades, he observes, hemispheric critical approaches have challenged long-held critical commonplaces; whereas "American scholars once obsessed over what was exceptional or non-imitative in American literature," "denationalized" critical approaches have enabled us to recognize that "the literature of the new nation was constructed in relation to transnational contexts and geographies." In other words, critics have begun more fully to explore the "tangled ontology" of the nation's literature (3). Richards hopes to add to this exploration a deeper recognition of the role that racial imitation plays in that literature. Here Richards arrives at an intriguing and motivating paradox: many early writers *did*

resist imitation of their British (and European) precursors; in an effort to do so, to find something distinctively “American,” they turned to “another kind of mimesis”: “it was by imitating Native and African Americans that the nation could distinguish itself from the Old World.” Richards calls it a “stunning irony” that “whites identified with those they internally colonized in order to resist the British who had colonized them” (4). And just as the “independent” nation took shape through such ironic acts of “racial and cultural mimesis,” so too did its literature (33). It is here that Richards stakes his critical claim.

Drawing on such theorists as Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha to define his terms, Richards makes an important distinction between mimicry and imitation: while “mimesis and imitation are general, often interchangeable terms that describe various kinds of imitation,” Richards notes, “mimicry” is a “more specialized term” that “occurs when the culturally marginalized copy the dominant culture” (9). Bhabha’s insistence on the “subversive potential” of mimicry undergirds Richards’s assertion that mimicry “describes the imitative gestures of a subordinate class” and thus “belongs to the colonized or enslaved” (11). Carefully attuned to the power dynamics of both imitation and mimicry, Richards’s study examines “red, white, and blackface,” “forms of racial imitativeness” that “played no small part in the construction of the nation’s cultural consciousness” (12). He argues that “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).

In studying such “gestures,” Richards ranges across a number of authors, the canonical as well as the less widely studied. He devotes chapters to such usual suspects as Brockden Brown, Irving, Cooper, and Melville. Not surprisingly, given his interest in blackface and minstrelsy, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* warrants a chapter; and the book concludes with an important examination of how less-studied black writers (Hannah Crafts, Frank Webb, and Martin Delany) engage with the blackface tradition. Although Richards is interested in imitation both as authorial practice and as theme, the “imitative gestures” he examines are made primarily by characters. This is, in other words, a character-driven study, devoted to close readings of the racial performances undertaken by such figures as Edgar Huntly (“redface performance” [39]), *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* George Harris (“rebellious mimicry” [129]), and “Benito Cereno”’s Babo (blackface minstrelsy and whiteface mimicry). Richards’s readings of these characters, and the various masks they don and discard, are incisive, casting fresh light on the complex intercultural dynamics that motivate texts and authors from the early Republican through the late antebellum periods.

Those dynamics are fraught and they are tangled; thus, as Richards limns them, he toggles and shifts. The forms of imitation he studies cut in all sorts of directions: white characters “play” Indians, Indians mimic whites, whites imitate blacks who themselves don blackface, blacks adopt whiteface, and so on. It can be dizzying, but the dizziness is instructive, pointing as it does to the ways in which “American identity ultimately is an unstable mixture of other identities” (187). As he analyzes this “unstable mixture,” Richards makes several important and original observations. In an early chapter, for example, he situates Irving anew, in the New York City markets and theaters where black culture and performance were on display. With his contention that Irving “witnessed the emergence of blackface culture in New York, and produced blackface texts that reflect the racial and cultural complexities of the new republic,” Richards offers insights into the writer, his texts, and his cultural moment that will bear important critical fruit in the future (65).

Readers may find it a bit troubling that Richards appears most interested in white writers. He devotes just one chapter to African American writers, examining what he calls their “blackface violence to challenge white nationalism” and their effort to put the “damage that minstrelsy inflicted on African Americans” on display (36). Native American writers make only a rare and passing appearance. This means, of course, that Richards runs the risk of reifying a literary tradition that looks mostly white—and mostly male, for that matter—and a reading of that tradition that in some ways denies agency to Native and African American authors. But in the end, we can, I think, appreciate *Imitation Nation* for what it does accomplish rather than fault it for what it leaves to the side. For Richards’s work is deep and wide-ranging, rich and multivocal. And, as its echoes with *The 1619 Project* suggest, *Imitation Nation* is also timely. We are witnessing a troubling moment in US history: even as we wrestle with the 400-year old legacy of slavery in our past and our present, we see white supremacists increasingly emboldened and unthinkable violence enacted in the name of racial and ethnic purity. At such a moment, Jason Richards’s effort to show how early writers call “the concept of racial purity” and the “concept of race itself into question” could not—unfortunately—be more salient (189).