



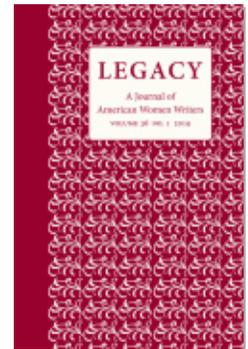
PROJECT MUSE®

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

Laura Barrio-Vilar

Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers, Volume 36, Number 1, 2019,
pp. 153-155 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/726501>



BOOK REVIEWS

Imitation Nation: Red, White, and Blackface in Early and Antebellum US Literature. By Jason Richards. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. xi + 256 pp. \$45.00 cloth/\$45.00 e-book.

Laura Barrio-Vilar, *University of Arkansas at Little Rock*

Jason Richards argues that, despite all attempts to create an original, indigenous literary tradition separate from European models, early and antebellum US literature became a hybrid of European, American Indian, and African aesthetics. Relying on both historical and literary analysis, Richards exposes the ambivalence inherent in the process of American identity formation. Although the republic emphasized white nationalism and exceptionalism, its imperialist agenda and diverse racial reality led to complex, paradoxical acts of racial and cultural imitation. *Imitation Nation* illustrates how early and antebellum American writers, such as Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Herman Melville, engage in transcultural mimesis through their characters' literal and symbolic red-, white-, and blackface performances, as they dramatize the nation's hybrid identity.

Imitation Nation relies on critical race theory, postcolonial theory, settler postcolonial theory, studies on American literary nationalism, and transnational American scholarship. In fact, one of its greatest achievements is the effective combination of all these theoretical approaches with compelling and carefully crafted critical close readings of literary texts. Richards's thorough research, critical framework, and narrative style could be used as examples for graduate students and young scholars to follow as they develop their own academic writing skills.

Crucial to Richards's argument are Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concept of mimicry, the history and evolution of American minstrelsy, and Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zones." Given the unstable and socially constructed nature of race and nationality, imitating and performing other races enables Americans to act out a new national identity opposed to and yet similar to

European imperial culture. As Richards's analyses of Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799) and Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823) 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" (38). 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" (1855). 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 command" through Cereno's white body (139). Richards convincingly illustrates how Melville turns minstrelsy against white American and European authority by having Babo play with and control racial representations.

Legacy readers might be slightly disappointed by the scarce number of American women writers included in Richards's study—only Harriet Beecher Stowe and Hannah Crafts are fully considered. However, in addition to the incisive analysis of blackface in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), probably one of the most interesting contributions of the book is Richards's examination of blackface in early African American novels in response to and in contrast with Stowe's controversial work. First, Richards uncovers the influence of minstrelsy in Stowe's problematic yet liberatory deployment of blackface in four of her black characters' stories. He demonstrates that, paradoxically and simultaneously, blackface reinforces racist stereotypes and destabilizes the mythology of a white homogeneous nation. Although some of Stowe's black characters resemble minstrel stock figures, the use of blackface conventions actually enables them to regain control of black representation, subvert stereotypes, develop a sense of selfhood, and resist the oppressive fiction of white nationalism. Furthermore, Richards's reading of the political significance

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” (159). 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. 1857) 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.

Antebellum American Women’s Poetry: A Rhetoric of Sentiment. By Wendy Dasler Johnson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. ix + 282 pp. \$40.00 paper/\$40.00 e-book.

Karen L. Kilcup, *University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

Most nineteenth-century American writers (and readers) comprehended a fact that took later scholars a while to relearn, or at least to acknowledge: all literature, even that which ostentatiously avoids contemporaneous debates, is political. They equally understood that poetry is always rhetorical. Exploring three writers’ persuasive strategies, Wendy Dasler Johnson’s *Antebellum*