

approach. He's written, in his own words, with the aim "to shift attention away from reading aesthetics as ideology toward trying to understand it . . . as both a theory of sensuous cognition and a theory of the forms and social functions of art" (51). For Schweighauser, self-identifying aestheticians like Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, Jeffrey Rhyme, and Isobel Armstrong may pretend to an interest in "aesthetics itself," but in the eyes of the author of *Beautiful Deceptions*, they, too, are controlled by an inherited tendency to relate any aesthetic discussion back to "the political concerns that dominate literary and cultural studies these days" (51–52). This critical tic is not, notably, the meaning of the word *deception* that appears in the title to Schweighauser's volume. Rather, *Beautiful Deceptions* treats the complex "collective decision-making processes" and "conditions of knowledge production" that characterized the era's aesthetics outside the realms of politics and epistemology (181). Much as early American art was finally, in Schweighauser's estimation, "about itself," *Beautiful Deceptions*, like *American Enchantment*, represents a methodologically adventurous exploration of the critical methods that have become a reflexive concern among many a practicing Americanist today (181).

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***Imitation Nation: Red, White, and Blackface in Early and Antebellum US Literature.* By Jason Richards. Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press. 2017. xi, 244 pp. Cloth, \$45.00; e-book, \$45.00.**

***Stranger America: A Narrative Ethics of Exclusion.* By Josh Toth. Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press. 2018. xii, 282 pp. Cloth, \$79.50; paper, \$39.50; e-book, \$79.50.**

Anxiety over race, ethnicity, culture, and identity erupts at the core of the American experience in separate books by Jason Richards and Josh Toth. Richards and Toth proceed in dramatically different ways in their studies of this American crisis of being and meaning. Richards focuses tightly on the relationship of race, ethnicity, and culture with American identity while Toth incorporates those issues within a broader philosophical examination of the American psyche. Both succeed in writing works of scholarly and critical significance. Toth examines the dilemma of being American through a brilliant, unceasing barrage of names, terms, themes, and ideas in contemporary

continental philosophy. His book becomes a dazzling display of how contemporary philosophical thought can help us analyze American identity.

Richards keeps it simple. His writing and analysis are readily accessible and transparent. Compared to Toth's onslaught of terminology and ideas, Richards avoids heavy theorizing. About one aspect of his basic theme of ethnic and racial imitation, he says, for example, that "blackface theater was always to a greater or lesser degree about absorbing the other" (26). Without diving very much deeper into critical theory or philosophy, Richards writes lucidly, smoothly, and solidly to argue that "identity formation" (7) based on racial, ethnic, and cultural imitation defined American character. From the very beginning, he says, America was an oxymoron, "an imperial democracy, a herrenvolk republic, divided along Manichean lines of color—red for savage, black for slave, and white for American" (27). Imitation became the means for Americans to balance the contradictions of being racist and imperialist while at the same time espousing the precepts of liberty and equality of the Declaration of Independence. Studying the postrevolutionary and antebellum period, Richards reconsiders classic work in the literary and cultural canon by Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, but he also sheds important and fresh light on insufficiently explored and studied areas of cultural history regarding race, ethnicity, and performance during this period such as the emergence of New York blackface from the "minstrel breeding grounds" (69) of lower Manhattan.

Race and ethnicity also occupy Toth's work but within an expansive philosophical context. For Toth, racial and ethnic anxiety becomes part of the crises of modernity involving the perennial tensions of the insufficiency of language to express what is beyond language and the inexorable conflicts of the self, the other, and society. He writes with conviction and power, successfully melding writers and thinkers into a dynamic and coherent study. He confidently weaves diverse disciplines into a cohesive methodology. In an original and provocative analysis of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) that challenges previously settled interpretations of the film by such figures as Michael Rogin, Toth establishes the tone of his work by saying "the Oedipal implications" of a scene from the film are "more Hegelian than Freudian" (32). Clearly anathematizing blacking in any form as "yet another mode of lynching, an *evil* effort to maintain the melancholic possibility of pure exclusion/inclusion" (35), he still distinguishes between Al Jolson's minstrel blackface in *The Jazz Singer* and blackface in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Choosing "to persevere a while longer on America's fixation with race and the terror of racial ambiguity" (63), Toth deploys the Hegelian "law of the heart" (33, 37, 81, 227) and modern Continental philosophers to contextualize race in discussions of the sublated "immanent self" (38) and "the contingency of relation" as expressed in Jean-Luc Nancy's concentration on "the impossibility of *being* outside relation" (38). The difficulty of resolving such perplexities relates, Toth maintains, to melancholia and Derridean haunting. He proposes Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) as the culmination of such issues so that "Bartleby exposes melancholia as the necessary effect and foundation of a

democratic social order that hopes to maintain its faith in the promise of inclusion while simultaneously practicing exclusion” (104).

For those interested in contemporary thought on ethics, especially in relation to establishing and maintaining democracy and community, Toth’s bridging of Nancy with Emmanuel Levinas, as some others do, should make his study of American culture, character, and thought especially interesting. Toth sees *The Jazz Singer* and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) as following Nancy’s argument that “a sense of individuality is effected by the contingency of communal relations that necessarily precede that sense” (45). He understands such relations as consistent with Levinas. Toth believes the two thinkers come together in discussing “the face-to-face encounter.” He asserts, “Isn’t this as much Nancy’s point as Levinas’s?” (132). In such a mode of thought, Toth argues, “we must nevertheless hold to (on some level) *an ethics of the face*—as in an ethics of sharing and receiving something recognizable” (133). Toth imagines dire consequences for failing to live up to such an ethics that would lead to an “ethical violence” (130) that in turn “could easily justify an egotistical withdrawal of the self, an abject refusal to share the self or to *work* at understanding the other” (133).

The spectrum of diverse works that Toth convincingly analyzes in detail proves as impressive as his use of philosophy for insight and understanding. He brings together studies of Johnson, Melville, Nella Larsen, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Edward Albee. Most startling for this reviewer at least, Toth commingles these studies with zombie narratives and Philip K. Dick’s androids. He establishes a compelling contrast of modernism and postmodernism in the work of Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David. To develop his studies, he applies original work and theories of “autonarratives” and “auto-plasticity.” His interest in temporalization and representation relates to the work of Nancy and Levinas on spacing and ethics.

Throughout the study, Toth’s vision of “democratic ethics” (153) highlights his “discussion of American ethics, love, and democratic relations” (166). When studying Bob Dylan, he sees and hears “the possibility of fomenting and sustaining a democracy of the incommensurable” (234). Just as tantalizing as his work on Dylan’s music and films is Toth’s study of Woody Allen’s *Zelig* (1983), which he sees as reinforcing the “suggestion that both the impulse toward emphatic dissolution and the impulse toward egotistical solipsism function as an evasion of the self’s *infinite* potential (to recall Levinas), an effort to circumvent the impossibility of realizing a finally immanent self” (147). Both impulses, he believes, “in Levinasian terms,” serve to “largely define the American democratic ideal” (148). Interestingly, Richards also turns to *Zelig* for an encapsulating discussion of race, ethnicity, and culture, showing “that American identity is an unstable mixture of other identities” (187). Apparently, Woody Allen still resonates—at least in some academic quarters.

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