



Imitation

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 off stage, 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*

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

the Atlantic and western frontiers leads to American hybridity, not the ahistorical purity of exceptionalism. The equally rich chapter on Cooper's *Leatherstocking* 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 a 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 *Bondswoman's Narrative* (c. 1857), Frank Webb's *Knickerbocker's Black and White* (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 conceptions 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 rede-

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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 Bind: Founding First Ladies and Slaves

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