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# Book Reviews: *Fugitive Empire: Locating Early American Imperialism* by Andy Doolen and *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* by Steven J. Belluscio

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***Fugitive Empire: Locating Early American Imperialism.* By Andy Doolen. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press. 2005. xxvii, 254 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$20.00.**

***To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing.* By Steven J. Belluscio. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press. 2006. x, 288 pp. \$44.95.**

Andy Doolen's *Fugitive Empire* uses a range of period writings, canonical literature, and historical landmarks to argue that despite democratic ideals, conceptions of race have always propelled the United States into aggressive acts of coercive control, both at home and abroad, even before the nation's declaration of selfhood in 1776. Doolen chooses the 1741 New York Conspiracy trial as his starting point, arguing that the execution of thirty suspected slave insurrectionists epitomized symptoms of imperial overreach, including a fixation on racialized threats, both domestic and foreign. Placing Justice Daniel Horsmanden's opinion in the trial against the backdrop of colonial interests in a concurrent war between England and Spain, Doolen sees Horsmanden playing to his contemporaries' fears that the Spanish were trying to incite slave insurrection as a central strategy in his circumstantial assertion of the conspiracy's existence. Utilizing especially well some key concepts from critical whiteness studies, Doolen goes on to survey writings by Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, William Apess, and Herman Melville in order to demonstrate the ironic dependence of an imperially minded majority identity on figurations of alternately helpful, threatening, or vanishing racial others.

In an overview of Brockden Brown's editorial work for the *Monthly Magazine*, Doolen finds consistent support of "the dominant and didactic voice of Federalist orthodoxy" (43). While most scholars see Brockden Brown the novelist as a more ambivalent observer of his era's intergroup tensions, Doolen sees in Arthur Mervyn a reflection of white paranoia about foreign-influenced black predators, particularly in its depiction of predatory black behavior during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. Because this sickness was thought to have been imported via commerce in the West Indies slave trade, Doolen reads white America's conception of the epidemic as itself symptomatic of a more general white fear of the Caribbean as a contaminating source of racialized "disorder and violence" (83). Doolen renders this white fear of encroaching blackness suspect by juxtaposing the credulity expressed in Brockden Brown's novel with descriptions of beneficent black action during the epidemic, as written by eyewitness members of the Free African Society.

Doolen sets Cooper's writings against a backdrop of the Missouri Compromise and attendant efforts to expatriate freed slaves to Africa. He then finds in *The Pioneers* a somewhat more ambivalent depiction of white nationalist sentiment, a racial solidarity unsteadily poised in opposition to both a fading Native American presence and a repressed, yet "intractable," African American one. Doolen goes on to address how subsequent American fantasies of a harmonious, racially homogenous nation were challenged by another intractable presence, mixed-race writer William Apess. Doolen reads the self-identified Pequot Indian as an awakened activist working in resistance to the

prevailing sentiment of vainglorious republicanism, exposing its underbelly of “a racially motivated imperialism, an offspring of a ruthless Christian and political faith” (182). In an epilogue, Doolen credits Melville with suggesting in “Benito Cereno” not only the willful blindness of the white republic to its foundationally racist abuses but also some consequences of its racist global overreach. He ends by spelling out the parallels evident throughout his study to today’s construction of another foreign, racialized threat, reminding us that the current “war on terror” is anything but new.

In contrast to the sociopolitical bent of Doolen’s detailed historical orientation, Steven Belluscio’s historical interests seem purely literary. The frame work for Belluscio’s study of a century-wide swath of both African American and “white ethnic” passing narratives is the tension between the free-willed subjectivity of realism and the deterministic drives and contexts of naturalism. Belluscio precedes discussion of his primary objects of study with a comparison of two 1892 novels, William Dean Howells’s *An Imperative Duty* and Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, which he uses to demonstrate both their foundational depictions of passing as a “moral dilemma” that called for either “cultural betrayal” or “racial allegiance” and their differing, race-based negotiations of the conventions of literary realism (55). Belluscio acknowledges that because the difficulties and rewards of passing can differ widely for racially or ethnically nonwhite characters, his yoking of them is problematic. His unlikely juxtaposition, however, eventually suggests the need for complicating received notions of genre.

Belluscio argues that when such “white ethnic” authors as Anzia Yesierska, Abraham Cahan, and Gino Speranza created characters who pass for white or gain through acculturation a whitened status, they tended to emphasize an independent subjectivity that echoes the thematic and aesthetic conventions of realism, glossing over in the process “the theoretical problematics of identity,” including the ontological contradictions and impossibilities embedded in the notion of race (21). Perhaps the most revealing insights for Belluscio’s chosen realm of literary history arise from his consideration of African American works, including texts by Chesnut, Charles Johnson, Nella Larsen, Schulyer, Fauset, and others. Belluscio credits these writers with echoing in their passing narratives the contextual cognizance of naturalism; with moving beyond earlier generic conventions toward those of modernism; and with sharply critiquing the concept of race, thereby emphasizing a protopostmodern awareness of performativity, staged in terms not only of race but also of gender and sexuality.

Belluscio’s comparisons between black and nonblack passing texts also include careful distinctions between ethnically Italian and Jewish passing narratives, and between texts authored by men or by women. In addition, Belluscio elaborates in more detail than Doolen does the adaptability for literary scholars of many concepts and methods developed during the “critical whiteness studies” recently conducted in other disciplines. Both Doolen and Belluscio nimbly demonstrate the continually underplayed and ongoing significance of white hegemony to the formation of individual and national identities as well as to literature and its scholarly reception.

Belluscio concludes with a retelling of Alice Walker's revival of Zora Neale Hurston, an act of recovery that he considers representative of how the urge toward whiteness expressed in passing narratives has come full circle, back to a reclaiming of that which has been whitened. Although Belluscio acknowledges again crucial differences between black and "white ethnic" recovery efforts, his own urge to see concluding parallels between these differing post passing inclinations produces a rather overly neat set of correspondences, a collapsing of difference that he better avoids elsewhere.

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