Review: Review: *Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction*
Reviewed Work(s): Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction by Diana Rebekkah Paulin
Review by: Samantha Pinto
Source: *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Sep., 2013), pp. 245-249
Published by: University of California Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2013.68.2.245
Accessed: 13-07-2018 17:07 UTC

period, even as Browning and Tennyson strive to win religious authority for secular poetic texts. In this respect, Blair, with her emphasis on writers such as John Keble, Isaac Williams, Christina Rossetti, and a range of lesser-known Anglican, Dissenting, and Catholic poets and authors, rounds out LaPorte's call to appreciate the diversity of religious responses to modernity. Read alongside each other, Blair's *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* and LaPorte's *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* suggest the rich stereoscopic perspective gained by remembering the possibilities that modernization grants to what Blair calls "the Victorian poetry of faith" as well as the (now) more anthologized Victorian poetry of skepticism and religious questioning (*Form and Faith*, p. 3). Between them, LaPorte and Blair testify to the startling change of fortune, one might even say resurrection, that two subjects—form and faith—have recently undergone in nineteenth-century studies.

Joshua King
Baylor University

Diana Rebekkah Paulin, *Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Pp. xxviii + 315. $75 cloth; $25 paper.

Diana Rebekkah Paulin's *Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction* is a project that is at once interested in representations of miscegenation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in what Paulin calls "miscegenated reading"; in other words, *Imperfect Unions* is interested in both the act and sign of racial hybridization and its metaphorical capacity to stand in for changing ideals of U.S. national identity and citizenship during the period. Examining works by a diverse range of authors—Dion Boucicault, Louisa May Alcott, Bartley Campbell, William Dean Howells, Charles Chesnutt, Thomas Dixon, Pauline Hopkins, J. Rosamond Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, and Bob Cole—Paulin systematically details the paradox of miscegenation as a "discursive landscape [that] both highlighted and hid interracial unions and sex" (p. xvi). These texts staged marriage and other interracial relationships as "illicit, explicit, and corporeal" (p. xxii) contact that stood as "microcosms" (p. xix) of the changing political landscape of U.S. citizenship before, during, and after the Civil War, Reconstruction, Westward Expansion, and Imperialism.

Managing both racial anxiety and the promise of a more progressive "egalitarian society" (p. 48), Paulin's choice of texts always points to the thorny difficulties of regulating and representing contact between racialized bodies. In her first chapter, "Under the Covers of Forbidden Desire: Interracial Unions as Surrogates," for example, she considers the widely divergent worlds of Dion Boucicault's oft-performed play *The Octoroon* and Louisa May Alcott's' short fiction of the Civil War era. From the usual tragic mulatta arc of the second most popular drama of the period (next to adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) to Alcott's more vexed fictions of relationships between white women and black men that stand "between romance and realism" (p. 47), Paulin emphasizes how heterosexual, platonic, and homosocial interracial relationships fascinated the public and encapsulated the best and worst hopes for a changing American populace—and national identity. But though Paulin's readings of Alcott's and others' fictions throughout *Imperfect Unions* remain compelling, the real strength and draw of the book is her archive and contextualization of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century drama; Paulin insinuates drama and its public significance into readings of what have become mainstay texts of nineteenth-century American studies' critical attention, challenging fiction's dominance and leading us through potential scholarly and pedagogical routes of inclusion for drama in our daily research and classroom routines.

The book's argument about miscegenation and the nation critically hinges on drama and its specific, staged performances that shift our understandings of national narratives of race, sexuality, and the body politic. Following scholarly work by Daphne Brooks on African American performances of (roughly) the same time period and Tavia Nyong'o's work on the central significance of mixed-race performance across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Paulin's work does more than riff off of Nyong'o's argument in *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009) about miscegenation and futurity—though it could stand to engage in a more sustained way the landscape of mixed-race reading that Nyong'o's book so carefully maps (and that *Imperfect Unions* seems to beg comparison to in its last chapter), and with the histories of embodied black performance that Brooks so thoroughly traces in her *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2006). When *Imperfect Unions* foregrounds Paulin's unique work on drama as a genre that centrally informed the public's view of race and race relations, the book hits its core intervention: drama of the period

literally staged the taboo of miscegenation as a visible negotiation with race's changing national construction and, hence, its power to disrupt other imagined narratives of nationness via casting, promotion, protests, and press.

That unique genre temporality of drama—live but repeated in various regional and urban settings, popular across divergent audiences, and fodder for both the national and local press—emerges as the generative tension between dramatic and fictional texts in most of the book's other chapters. In the second chapter, "Clear Definitions for an Anxious World: Late Nineteenth-Century Surrogacy," the backdrop of the 1893 World's Fair, for instance, emphasizes drama as a place that set the national stage for the eroticization of difference not just as display but as relational, and ongoing—requiring the "maintenance" (p. 60) of whiteness as much as it policed categories of blackness, as Paulin so cogently argues about William Dean Howells's novel *Imperative Duty* and Bartley Campbell's play *The White Slave*.

In chapter 3, "Staging the Unspoken Terror," Paulin maps the turn-of-the-century cultural obsession with the colorline that could cut both ways in texts by racist white and progressive black authors like Charles Chesnutt in his classic novel *The Marrow of Tradition* and Thomas Dixon in his play *The Clansman*. This chapter's argument has ramifications for the emergence of the post-Reconstruction violent representation and regulation of black masculinity (W. D. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was based on Dixon's play) that extended well into the twentieth century, with Chesnutt's dramatic fiction of historical interracial relations (including depictions of the far more common unions between white men and black women) playing out against the backdrop of these odious public performances of the imagined persistent threat of interracial rape posed by black men—and their white sympathizers—in works like Dixon's play. Paulin's book never suggests a progress narrative of racial politics or representation in the march of U.S. history, in other words, but instead shows the terrain of miscegenation as one that reflects and shapes the unique anxieties about race and national identity that crop up in various micro-histories of legal and cultural wrangling over race and rights in the United States.

Chapter 4, "The Remix: Afro-Indian Intimacies," offers an incredibly nuanced, original look at the politics of race as popular, "escapist" entertainment in a cultural landscape that extends far beyond the black and white binary. Its brilliant examination of Pauline Hopkins's serialized novel *Winona* and James Weldon Johnson, J. Rosamond Johnson, and Bob Cole's musical *Red Moon* suggests the elevated stakes of "a country that is obsessed with performance[s]" of

race (p. 149) in the wake of the settler colonialism that engendered the genocide of Native American peoples and the mass immigration and disenfranchisement of Chinese laborers, as well as the extreme violence of chattel slavery from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Paulin's stunning recovery of production histories of *Red Moon* is particularly notable for scholars of drama and African American studies here. Examining the exploitative but also the "optimisti[c]" role (p. 185) that miscegenation can play in these lesser-known works by major African American writers, Paulin's fourth chapter illuminates how James Weldon Johnson and Hopkins might fit into "The Futurity of Miscegenation" that she argues for in her final chapter, which focuses on these authors' more well-known fictional texts, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Of One Blood. Imperfect Unions* argues in this last chapter for the complex temporality of miscegenated reading of canonical African American fictions, one that acknowledges deep national and transnational histories of interracial contact, the difficulties of working out contemporary anxieties around interracial romance, and an imagined future of miscegenation that motions toward diaspora. A reader might only wish that this chapter could more directly incorporate the invaluable lessons learned from Paulin's staging of American dramatic texts as central to understanding ongoing debates about miscegenation.

When Paulin gets to sex itself in the Conclusion of *Imperfect Unions*, "The 'Sex Factor' and Twenty-First-Century Stagings of Miscegenation," you realize that it has been there all along for the book—in the close contact of staged bodies, the public conversations over casting, the major newspaper reviews, and the salacious promotion of *seeing* miscegenated bodies in action on the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American stage. The conclusion offers up W.E.B. DuBois's proto-science fiction story "The Comet" as the hinge of this new, embodied, sexually charged futurity of contemporary mixed-race studies. It suggests, although it does not state it directly, that this generic turn to speculative fiction and other experimental modes of representation might be a significant new practice of miscegenated reading that continues the legacy of an earlier period's emphasis on performance and drama. What Paulin's book offers, through drama, is a way to frame her argument about miscegenation as surrogacy through the lens of genre and performance history—recentering drama as foundational to our understanding of race and national identity in this time period. This reframing is also in service of the miscegenated reading practices she highlights, suggesting that we, as nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Americanist scholars,

could and should look to the stage as a model for our readings of more canonical, fictional narratives of mixed-race identity and the changing sense of nation that emerged in the broad history that Paulin covers. *Imperfect Unions* works at its highest level as an argument for the significance of a largely displaced genre in nineteenth-century American studies in understanding shifting racial and national identifications of the period.

Samantha Pinto
Georgetown University

Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 243. $55.

In the introduction to *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel*, Vanessa L. Ryan describes Herbert Spencer's account of his mode of "thinking without thinking," as explained to a young Marian Evans (George Eliot), when she exclaimed that the thinking that went into Spencer's 1851 tome *Social Statics* must have been so arduous, that she "was surprised to see no lines on [his] forehead." Spencer explained: "My mode of thinking does not involve the concentrated effort which is commonly accompanied by the wrinkling of the brows." Rather, for Spencer, thinking happens "little by little, in unobtrusive ways, without conscious intention or appreciable effort." And thus, "it was, I believe, because the thinking done went on in this gradual, almost spontaneous way, without strain, that there was an absence of those lines of thought which Miss Evans remarked" (Spencer, quoted in *Thinking without Thinking*, p. 16). Whether the writing of *Thinking without Thinking* produced "lines of thought" on Ryan's forehead, only she and her associates will ever know; but all readers who follow the lines of thinking represented in this book will find themselves deeply rewarded by a new picture of Victorian accounts of thinking.

Ryan's focus is precisely on the "almost spontaneous" and "unobtrusive" forms of mental activity that, she argues persuasively, emerge with special clarity, and special meanings, in later-nineteenth-century writings about the mind. Herbert Spencer was not alone in touting, analyzing, and practicing modes of mentality that counter the notion of thought as brow-furrowingly effortful, intentional, and hyperconscious. Ryan discusses a constellation of important Victorian