

6-1-2010

Reviews of John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*; Elizabeth Young's *Black Frankenstein*; Matthew J. Costello's *Secret Identity Crisis : Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America*

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, [gerard.canavan@marquette.edu](mailto:gerard.canavan@marquette.edu)

---

Accepted version. *American Literature*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (June 2010): 427-429. [DOI](#). © 2010 Duke University Press. Used with permission.

Gerry Canavan was affiliated with Duke University at the time of publication.

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

***English Faculty Research and Publications/College of Arts and Sciences***

***This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION; but the author's final, peer-reviewed manuscript.***  
The published version may be accessed by following the link in the citation below.

*American Literature*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (2010): 427-429. [DOI](#). This article is © Duke University Press and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Duke University Press does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Duke University Press.

*Book Review of Colonialism and the  
Emergence of Science Fiction; Black  
Frankenstein: The Making of an American  
Metaphor; Secret Identity Crisis: Comic  
Books and the Unmasking of Cold War  
America*

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* arises out of a lacuna in standard theories of science fiction. Where Darko Suvin privileges "cognitive estrangement" as the genre's essential feature—the de- and refamiliarizing power of imagined alterities—and where Fredric Jameson privileges the radical retemporalization of our disordered present into the settled historical past of some possible future, Rieder refocuses our attention on the colonial gaze. He argues that because science

fiction emerges alongside (and out of ) imperialist expansion, as a genre it not only “exposes what colonialism imposes” but is also produced and bound by the horizon of colonialist ideology (15).

Following, but importantly altering, the approaches of Suvin and Jameson (as well as film theorist Laura Mulvey), Rieder centers his narrativization of the history of science fiction on the colonial catastrophe. First, he argues that the psychic fuel for sci-fi encounters with time travelers, aliens, robots, mutants, and other parahuman subjectivities can be found in the social anxieties of a humbled Europe, one which could no longer imagine itself at the center of history after having been dethroned by the Copernican denial of a geocentric cosmos and by colonial encounters with nonwhite, non-Christian, noncapitalist Others. (Rieder’s description of Europe suffering from identity crisis seems not unlike the epistemic panic surrounding postmodernism and cultural relativism today.) Second, science fiction is a key location for what Rieder calls “the reading public’s vicarious enjoyment of colonial spoils” (27), important for the social reinforcement of imperialist ideology throughout the nineteenth century. Here Rieder discusses the ideological factors motivating “lost race” and “El Dorado” fantasies such as H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* or James De Mille’s *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, as well as the assumptions about race and economic accumulation that are employed to justify the appropriation of wealth through colonial violence. Third, and perhaps most crucially, he demonstrates that colonialism’s discourse of superior and inferior races—the colonial gaze—is a highly unstable positionality that is under constant threat of polar inversion, an instance of Hegelian master-slave dialectic whose fundamental precariousness is enacted and reenacted throughout the history of science fiction. In an alternate history, or in future days, the colonizer knows he could well be the colonized. In this way the genre sharply critiques the violence at the heart of European imperialist expansion by replicating it, over and over, in barely sublimated forms both for and against the colonizer. The exemplary science fiction novel becomes for Rieder not Thomas More’s *Utopia* or H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* but Wells’s inverted vision of an imperialized England in flames, *War of the Worlds*, which explicitly equates the Martian colonization of Earth with the British extermination of the native population of Tasmania. “Are we such apostles of mercy,” Wells pointedly asks, “as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?” (1898; reprint, [New York: Bantam Books, 1988], 5).

Elizabeth Young’s *Black Frankenstein* stands as an exemplary model for a study of science fiction infused with postcolonial awareness. Young traces the myth of Frankenstein’s monster as a figure for both white panic and black resistance from Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831—the same year a revised edition of *Frankenstein*, the first credited to Mary Shelley, was published in Britain—through early film adaptations to the stand-up comedy of Dick Gregory and beyond. Although concerned primarily with U.S. literature and culture, the centrality of Shelley’s original work marks *Black Frankenstein* as a distinctly transatlantic study; Young intriguingly finds an echo of the “Africanist presence” of Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992) lurking in the British literary tradition as well. Young’s study likewise enriches and complicates our understanding of what Paul Gilroy calls “the black Atlantic” by focusing on the black Atlantic’s various uses of a novel from “the white Atlantic,” one written by an abolitionist who grew up near an important seaport for the British slave trade and who drew on contemporaneous racial stereotypes about African physicality and miscegenary amalgamation to create her tragic-heroic “Monster”—demonstrating the complex appropriations and counterappropriations at work in this hybridized cultural space.

Naturally, the myth of Frankenstein’s monster does not speak to us across the centuries with a single voice. For Fredrick Douglass, it is the institution of slavery that is “the pet monster of the

American people" (19); for Gregory, it is the self-oppressing subjectivity of the colonized that becomes "the monster inside me" (217). The Boris Karloff-like shuffling of the zombies in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*—the rebelling spiritual descendents of the enslaved Haitian *zombi*—becomes in Young's reading a reconceptualization of whiteness itself as self-created and self-reinforcing monstrosity, ultimately and needlessly destroying the film's black hero. Nor does this study, thorough though it is, exhaust the possibilities for rereadings of *Frankenstein* informed by cultural theory; Young's generous introduction is outright apologetic in its delimiting of the project to a specifically African American political context and the necessary bracketing of both Orientalist Frankenstein and Brides of Frankenstein for the purposes of this work.

Something like Rieder's colonial gaze is the theoretical lens at the heart of Matthew Costello's *Secret Identity Crisis*, transformed here to reflect the new valences of the colonial order during and after the Cold War. Costello's narrative history of Marvel Comics characters, especially Jack Kirby's Captain America and Stan Lee's Iron Man, is a worthy contribution to both American studies and the burgeoning field of comics theory. He ably charts the turning sour of America's self-aggrandizing fantasies of superheroism, starting in the 1970s as the nation's perception of its own cultural superiority began to invert. The nationalistic fervor of the so-called Golden Age of Comics—witness our eponymous superhero punching out Adolf Hitler on the cover of *Captain America* #1—and the contended postwar utopia of the Silver Age give way in the Bronze Age to hopeless political ambiguities and a fractured sense of national identity, organized around a chastened and corrupted nation whose rotten core is always at risk (as Costello's subtitle suggests) of public exposure. Captain America discovers a fascist conspiracy operating out of the Nixon White House and renounces the nation altogether, becoming Nomad, the man without a country. Iron Man—originally a symbol of U.S. technological and military superiority—turns his back on the business of war in the face of the Vietnam disaster and disbands the multinational defense contractor operated by his secret identity, billionaire industrialist Tony Stark, before descending into alcoholism and ultimately living on the streets. In the Bush years these two archetypically American Cold Warriors even find themselves battling not supervillains but each other, squabbling over a Patriot Act-style "Superhero Registration Act"; at the story's climax, Captain America is shot dead, and any last vestige of superheroic U.S. exceptionalism along with him. (But take heart, true believers! No one in comics stays dead for very long.)