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# J. Gerald Kennedy, *Strange Nation: Literary Nationalism and Cultural Conflict in the Age of Poe*

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## REFERENCES

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- 1 Gerald Kennedy's book aims at bringing into view "the deformities that American literary nationalism tried to conceal" by "deconstructing the strangeness of nationalism itself and US cultural nation-building" (4, 11). By focusing on the period between the two great compromises of 1820 and 1850, the author illuminates the growing gap between nationalist illusions and sociohistorical realities. His juxtaposition of texts by little-known authors with writings of major writers, and his use of a wide range of genres—including speeches, songs, travel narratives, fables, romances, short stories, and novels—allow the reader to understand that the uncertainty of national identity pervaded every level of print culture during these violent, formative decades. The technique of including narratives by those excluded from full citizenship also provides salient insights into the disparity between national imaginings.
- 2 Kennedy's carefully argued study of these incongruous conceptions of American nationhood is organized in nine chapters falling into three topically-arranged units. A third of the book concentrates on the reassessment of Euro-American cultural identity; the middle third investigates responses to the American past (relations with Native-Americans; the Revolution); and the final third presents alternate versions of the American future (slavery crisis in the South; westward expansion). The last chapter establishes Poe's tales of death and decay as an example of a form of writing that queers

the fantasies of the nation's exceptionalism to reveal frightening violence and unacknowledged angst. All nine chapters are tied together by short concluding sections that recapitulate their introductions and arguments, and point to next chapters.

- 3 The introductory section of the book engages with a general definition of nation and nationalism as cultural blind spot and the "site of implicit conflict" (Gellner, Balibar), before exposing the incongruous nature of US nationhood as rooted in the radical incompatibility of civic and ethnic nationalism before—and since—the Declaration of Independence. This inherent contradiction, Kennedy argues, explains the ever-increasing "strangeness" of the stories of American life and history penned by writers engaged in the conflicted enterprise of inventing national culture and tradition in the antebellum era.
- 4 Although the term "strange" is never strictly defined, it is related to "the broil of suspicion, hostility, and disunity" (242) expressed in the counter-narratives that expose "the weird operations at work behind the facade of American nation-making" (35). While some of these texts, such as William Apes's *A Son of the Forest* (1829) or William Wells Brown's *The American Fugitive in Europe* (1855) are unambiguous denunciations of nationalistic delusions, others, such as Irving's *Astoria* (1836) or Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lake* (1844), are fraught with contradictions and misgivings. Moreover, Kennedy's method of reading classic works alongside lesser-known texts provides the reader an opportunity to assess a writer's evolving views. For instance, the chapter entitled "Rewriting the Border Wars" brings into comparative juxtaposition Cooper's first volumes of the *Leatherstocking Tales* with Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824) and a seldom cited counter national narrative by John Dunn Hunter, *Memoirs of Captivity Among the Indians of North America* (1823). The procedure helps Kennedy to demonstrate convincingly that reading the ending of *The Last of the Mohicans* as Whitmanesque adhesiveness does not do justice to Cooper's subtler implication that "the dilemma of national identity inheres in the contradictions of its own indeterminacy" (160).
- 5 The strength of Kennedy's demonstration lies in his choice of a critical historicism which uncovers the deformities of American nationalism by focusing on the interplay between near and far at work in texts pondering the ambiguities of American identity in the post-Revolutionary era. In the first three chapters of the book, which examine the European roots of US national cultural identity, this approach serves to highlight a number of critical responses from such writers as Poe, Irving, Cooper, Catherine M. Sedgwick, Margaret Fuller, and William Wells Brown. Kennedy's elegant analyses reveal tensions between local and national (as in Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winckle"), forms of "patriotic antinationalism" (Fuller, Brown), or alternative conceptions of nationalism (Cooper's *Gleanings in Europe*). In chapter 6, which focuses on literary depictions of the Revolution, the author interprets antiwar reflections in William Gilmore Simms's novel *The Partisan: a Tale of the Revolution* (1835) as a response to Jacksonian expansionist politics. Close inspection of Simms's oblique, abstract language reveals that his partisan tale is undermined by deep apprehensions about American colonizing greed, which may signal the manifestation of the "political unconscious" (Jameson). Kennedy's attention to the reconfiguration of the premises of nationalism in relation to a wider scale demonstrates that (to borrow Paul Giles's formulation) "antebellum American authors do not so much ground their work upon native soil as situate it on highly charged and fraught boundary between past and present,

circumference and displacement, and the challenge each individual writer faces is in mapping out a discrete location, in finding a space from which to speak” (Giles, 107).

- 6 The last, and particularly strong, chapter of the book focuses on Poe’s turn to American subjects (after 1842) to cast a sinister reflection on Polk’s rhetoric of national expansionism. A Poe scholar, Kennedy compellingly argues that Poe’s “necro citizenship” (Castronovo) in “Some Words with a Mummy”, “The Oblong Box” or “Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar” counters the myth of American progress. The analysis of “Melonta Tauta” returns to the theme of the unbuilt monument to Washington in the introduction where Poe’s tale is placed in conversation with two other vignettes of Apocalypse—a story by George Lippard and an oration by Robert C. Winthrop— to figure the Union’s ineluctable collapse. Poe’s notorious exclusion from F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) emphasized the marginality of his position in US cultural life. Conversely, Kennedy’s deliberate choice not to include any of Matthiessen’s representative American writers and focus instead on less-discussed narratives is a way to stress the contingency and conflicted formation of American nationalism.
- 7 *Strange Nation* offers a rewarding and engaging study of the representation of “the cultural conflicts emanating from racism, religious bigotry, sexism, slavery, Indian removal, nativism, sectionalism, and many other antebellum controversies” (x). The inclusion of a variety of documents of nineteenth-century popular print culture, and blend of detailed interpretations and broader historical contextualization make it an important book for both specialist and non-specialist readers. By rooting the strange contradictions of US nationhood in the ambiguous semantic mappings of “We the People”, Kennedy offers a comment on America that seems as pertinent today as it was in the age of Poe.

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