

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2013

Review of *Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier*
by Matthew Reborn

Theresa Strouth Gaul
Texas Christian University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>

Strouth Gaul, Theresa, "Review of *Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier* by Matthew Reborn" (2013). *Great Plains Quarterly*.
2479.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2479>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier.
By Matthew Reborn. New York: Oxford
University Press, 2012. x + 207 pp. Illustrations,
photographs, notes, works cited, index. \$65.00.

Important works on U.S. drama have emphasized the radically unstable nature of performance, finding it a shifting and contested ideological space. Despite this recent critical turn, Matthew Reborn argues that considerations of the frontier in drama and performance have remained singularly resistant to recognizing the various

meanings that emerged in performances of the frontier. Arguing against the assumption that nineteenth-century frontier dramas were always a straightforward means of forwarding expansionist ideologies, Reborn explores how performances promulgated a “much more variegated and diffuse notion of the frontier” than has been heretofore acknowledged, one that sometimes “aimed to undercut the central tenets of Manifest Destiny.” Not merely a historical or geographical space, the frontier is for Reborn a “set of performative practices”; that is, he claims that the idea of the frontier was constructed on the stages of theaters along the Eastern Seaboard as powerfully as in the Great Plains. Aiming to rewrite the history of American frontier performance and American theatrical history more broadly, Reborn persuasively demonstrates that “frontier performance has always been a heterogeneous constellation of acts that work to settle and unsettle American ideologies.”

Reborn’s chapters treat the politics of Edwin Forrest’s well-known performance as *Metamora* in John Augustus Stone’s drama of the same name (1829); the instability of James Kirke Paulding’s frontiersman in *The Lion of the West* (1830); the frontier roots of T. D. Rice’s minstrelsy; the frontier as a space of complicated identity play in Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859); the mediating of national memory carried out by post-Civil War frontier dramas *Horizon* (1871), by Augustin Daly, and *The Danites in the Sierras* (1910), by Joaquin Miller; and an epilogue that brings the book’s purview up to the early twenty-first century, analyzing images of George W. Bush’s presidency and Ang Lee’s film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Easily the most inventive and significant in the book, Reborn’s chapter on T. D. Rice investigates the slippage between the figure of the minstrel and the frontiersman on U.S. stages and the interplay between minstrel and frontier performance traditions. Complicating the theatrical lineage usually traced for minstrelsy, Reborn provocatively concludes that “blackface minstrelsy exists as well as a kind of frontier performance.” With insights like this, Reborn’s study has the potential to make readers rethink

much of what they thought they knew about the nineteenth-century theater and points to the continued need for scholarship in this vein.

THERESA STROUTH GAUL
Department of English
Texas Christian University