BLACKNESS AND VALUE

Seeing Double

Blackness and Value investigates the principles by which “value” operates and asks whether it is useful to imagine that the concepts of racial blackness and whiteness in the United States operate in terms of these principles. Testing these concepts by exploring various theoretical approaches and their shortcomings, Lindon Barrett finds that the gulf between “the street” (where race is acknowledged as a powerful enigma) and the literary academy (where until recently it has not been) can be understood as a symptom of racial violence.

The book traces several interrelations between value and race, such as literate/illiterate, the signing/singing voice, time/space, civic/criminal, and academy/street, and offers relevant and fresh readings of two novels by Ann Petry. Whereas commonly approaches to race and value are examined historically or sociologically, this intriguing study provides a new critical approach that speaks to theorists of race as well as gender and queer studies.

Lindon Barrett is Associate Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature and the Program in African-American Studies at the University of California, Irvine.
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Editor
Eric Sundquist, University of California, Los Angeles

Founding Editor
Albert Gelpi, Stanford University

Advisory Board
Nina Baym, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Sacvan Bercovitch, Harvard University
Albert Gelpi, Stanford University
Myra Jehlen, Rutgers University
Carolyn Porter, University of California, Berkeley
Robert Stepto, Yale University
Tony Tanner, King’s College, Cambridge University

Books in the series
115. Janet Casey, Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine
114. Caroline Levander, Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in 19th-Century American Literature and Culture
113. Harryette Mullen, Freeing the Soul: Race, Subjectivity, and Difference in Slave Narratives
112. Dennis A. Foster, Sublime Enjoyment: On the Perverse Motive in American Literature
111. Eileen Gregory, H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines
110. Beverly Haviland, Henry James’s Last Romance: Making Sense of the Past and the American Scene
109. Alfred Arteaga, Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities
BLACKNESS AND VALUE

Seeing Double

Lindon Barrett
For Dorothy Barrett,
with much love and respect
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .......................................................... page xi
Introduction: “In the Dark” ............................................... 1

Part One  Violence and the Unsightly

1 Figures of Violence: Valuation, Authorization, Expenditures of the African American, and Other Ways of Telling .................................................. 11

2 Figuring Others of Value: Singing Voices, Signing Voices, and African American Culture ................. 55

3 (Further) Figures of Violence: The Street in the U. S. Landscape .................................................. 94

Part Two  Reasonings and Reasonableness

4 De-Marking Limits: Reading New Critical Bla(n)ckness .................................................. 131

Part Three  Phonic and Scopic Economies

5 Signs of Others: Circulations of a Purloined Letter Understood Otherwise .................................................. 183

6 Signs of the Visible: (Re)Moving Pictures in The Narrows .................................................. 214

Notes ........................................................................... 243

Bibliography ................................................................. 255

Index ........................................................................... ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project began as my dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania and received in those early stages of its development generous fellowship support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Mellon Foundation through its Program for Assessing and Revitalizing the Social Sciences (PARSS). Over the intervening years, the project has been supported by a Faculty Career Development Award and sabbatical leave from the University of California, Irvine, as well as a Resident Fellowship at the University of California Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI). Debra Massey and the staff at the UCHRI deserve mention for their extreme efficiency. Portions of Chapter 1 have appeared in Callaloo 13.4 (Fall 1990) and SubStance 67, 1992, and an earlier version of Chapter 3 has appeared in Cultural Critique 25 (Fall 1993).

While at the University of Pennsylvania, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with David DeLaura, Betsy Errkila, Marjorie Levinson, Sandra Pouchet Pacquet, and especially John Roberts. In addition to being perceptive, Sandra Pouchet Pacquet is one of the most gracious people I have ever met. John Roberts was an indefatigable reader and supporter of my work and the most invaluable intellectual resource and friend a graduate student could have. I also had the immense good fortune at this time to meet, work with, party with, and become lifelong friends with Elizabeth Alexander, Jennifer Brody, Kim Hall, Nicole King, Amy Robinson, Laura Tanner, and James Krasner. In the intervening years, I have been able to add to this list Dwight McBride, Saidiya Hartmann, Farah Griffin, Phillip Brian Harper, Kim Dillion, Arthur Little, Kobena Mercer,
Acknowledgments

Marcyliena Morgan, Valerie Smith, and Robyn Wiegman. Charles Rowell of Callaloo has been a longtime supporter of my work and a close friend. In southern California, I have found many talented and supportive colleagues: Rae Linda Brown, Rey Chow, Emory Elliot, Robert and Vivian Folkensflik, Abdul JanMohamed, Lillian Manzoor-Coats, J. Hillis Miller, Harryette Mullen, Jane Newman, Leslie Rabine, Gabriele Schwab, Patrick Sinclair, John Smith, and Richard Yarborough. I must single out three colleagues in particular: Thelma Foote, with whom I have an intellectual camaraderie; Steve Mailoux, who has probably read more of my work than any person on the planet; and John Carlos Rowe, who is a person of vast intellect and unimpeachable integrity. I have also learned much from the graduate students I have worked with at UC, Irvine; UCLA; and UC, San Diego; and I must recognize a series of undergraduate and graduate research assistants who have worked with me over a period of several years: Catherine Allan, Wilson Chen, Michael Miklos, Keta Miranda, Connie Razza, and Alonia Rose. Stuart Jay and Farid Matuk have enriched my time in southern California with their earnest interest in the life of the mind and their friendship. Eric Sundquist was instrumental in bringing this project to Cambridge University Press, and Wahneema Lubiano was a highly instructive reader of the manuscript. I am also grateful to Anna Sanow and the editorial staff at the Press. Certainly, for me, the intellectual example of Hortense Spillers has been immense; it seems to me that long ago she was already ten years ahead of the rest of us. Still, despite this abundant generosity and whatever examples I may have taken in the writing of this study, I am – needless to say – solely responsible for the weaknesses of the study, its faults of presentation and thought as well as scope and organization. I only hope they are not as overwhelming as I sometimes fear.

Beyond these forms of institutional and individual support, I have more personal debts to acknowledge. My family and my mother (to whom this book is dedicated) have been and are a constant source of reassurance and encouragement. Dorothy Barrett has taught me perserverance, laughter; to dance, to sometimes scream when you dance; and devotion. John Roberts, Elizabeth Alexander, Jennifer Brody, and Thelma Foote bear mention again. Last, but certainly and by no means least, I must express my love and gratitude to Harmon “Skip” Spruill, Lance Avington, Melvin White, and Barry Copilow, fabulous friends who sometimes make sitting down in front of a computer or a book an all too arduous task for me.