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Lindon Barrett

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION: “IN THE DARK”

Seeing Double is a suggestive subtitle for this study for several reasons. First, duality suggests the binarism by which the concept of value most routinely attempts to present itself. To “see” value is in some sense to “see” double. Another sense of the phrase “seeing double” implies a state of impaired, unreliable, or faulty perception, and this sense of the phrase is captured by the yoking of racial blackness with the concept of value, as the title suggests. In the U.S. polity and cultural imagination racial blackness is most often far from being taken as a term of value. To make such a proposal is most often to leave oneself open to being perceived as having impaired, unreliable, or faulty judgment. The aim of this project, however, is precisely to see double in these ways.

In considering value, this study attempts to formulate answers to three questions: In what ways does an interrogation of value as an abstract principle bear productively on the anatomization of the violence and oppressive force of racialization? In what specific ways can a critical discourse on value reveal peculiarities of race? In short, does value redact race, and vice versa? Indeed, this congress of an anatomization of value with considerations of the “racial” presuppositions of U.S. doxa reiterates one of the central premises of the study, which is that in U.S. cultural logic the abstract entities “value” and “race” keenly reflect one another, even to a point at which they might be considered isomorphic. At its simplest, value is a configuration of privilege, and, at its crudest, race is the same. Insofar as value, as a theoretical dynamic, promotes one form(ation) to the

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detriment of another (or others), race proves a dramatic instantiation of this principle.

Blackness and Value, in elaborating this thesis, is divided into six chapters, which are, in turn, presented in three sections – “Violence and the Unsightly,” “Reasonings and Reasonablenesses,” and “Scopic and Phonic Economies” – and their trajectory can be codified as follows: Part One elaborates a theoretical model of value and employs it in reading the cultural dynamics of a “racialized” African American presence in the United States; Part Two employs this model in relation to the cultural dynamics of the dominant “racial” position, whiteness; Part Three repeats the exercise by more openly considering the dynamics of these two configurations in tandem.

As will quickly become evident, the theoretical orientation toward value undertaken in this project grows in important ways out of a longstanding appreciation of the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Smith, most especially in *The Contingencies of Value*, outlines meticulously the systemicity and transactional nature of value, ineluctably rendering it contingent despite its best efforts to appear otherwise. Nonetheless, despite the very plain fact of my debt to Smith’s work, equally evident are substantial differences existing between the purview of her critical concerns and that of those pursued here. That is, at the same time *Blackness and Value* attempts to engage the sensibilities of Smith’s investigations, it aims also to provide an account of those paramount figures of racialization fixed in U.S. cultural logic as “blackness” and “whiteness.”

In addition to the neopragmatism of Smith, I call on a variety of criticism and critical schools to elaborate this position. My considerations, although certainly not Marxist, begin in part with Baudrillard and his reading of Marx on value; Mary Douglas’s structuralist anthropology and its reconfiguration in the literary and cultural work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White provide another initial interpretative framework. The central intellectual tradition, however, within which these analyses fall (but that they do not simply recapitulate) is the type of *poststructuralist* critical analysis following from Jacques Derrida’s *deconstructive* philosophizing, as set out in formative, or earlier, productions of his career like *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Dissemination*. It is very important to note that this characterization presupposes an accountable distinction between the terms “poststructuralist” and “deconstructive”: “Poststructuralism” is taken as a broader (and

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untidy) rubric not limited to but encompassing the permutations of deconstruction proliferated by a variety of class and racial critiques, feminisms, and queer theories, whereas “deconstruction” assumes a stricter concern with the complications of linguistic, philosophical, and textual unravelings that seem, above all, to return energies of inquiry to themselves as primarily abstracted – rather than culturally embodied – phenomena.

In this understanding, one paradigm lends itself more easily and fluidly to cultural analyses, and the other remains more clearly phenomenological. And my hope is that, given this distinction, if moments of the forthcoming analysis may resemble the phenomenologically indebted postures of Derridean derived deconstruction, they finally resolve themselves in an enterprising return to the culturally embodied scrutiny this study aims to articulate. Summarily put, the intellectual tradition most reflected in this work is the strand of deconstructive cum poststructuralist thought earnestly interested in disclosing the dysfunctions of an Enlightenment legacy both riddled and clarified by its inescapable aporias. The work shares with traditional poststructuralist theorizing a preoccupation with the antinomian and its irruptions within Enlightenment traditions of reason and culture.

In terms of interventions into African American literary and cultural criticism, the primary intervention made here is into a line of thought dedicated to conceptualizing the relation between literacy and African American subjectivity – perspectives instructively put forward by William Andrews, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Ronald Judy, Haryette Mullen, James Olney, Valerie Smith, Robert Stepto, and Alice Walker, for instance. In various ways all these critics ask, What are the overarching terms for the production of an African American expressive presence? My wish is to join them and others in this inquiry, even though the substantial and recent investment of African Americanist critical discourse in U.S. cultural studies is not reflected here. In fact, insofar as there is any such investment, it is not in the concerted juxtaposition of expressive textual phenomena with a local historical fabric but, rather, in the attentiveness of cultural studies to the exigencies of power and powerlessness and their subtle, pervasive insinuations.

It is important to note further that, in addition to a close engagement with the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith and other poststructuralist discourses, this study grows out of a long-standing admiration for the fiction and narrative vision of Ann Petry. Until

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recently, Petry has most routinely been considered a writer within the Richard Wright “orbit”; however, that description seems inadequate given her very different and considerable skills. Above all, Petry is a visionary of narrative architecture and complexity. She constructs narratives that convene and interweave the actions and lives of a broad array of characters, a feat accomplished not necessarily by bringing this array of characters into direct contact or conversation with one another but by pursuing the ways their lives affect or speak to each other through the relaying wakes of their actions in a populous narrative world. Working within traditional rather than experimental narrative forms, Petry deftly negotiates the logistics of intersecting movements and plots, as well as powerfully drawing the separate but redounding psychological intensities of a number of her characters. The marvellous effect is that what first seems the routine unraveling of a seamless plot becomes, extraordinarily, an expanding, rippling account increasingly exceeding the terms of linearity.

These impressively complex narrative architectures keenly broach the eccentricities of racialization. They provide subtle and provocative canvases on which to trace out the most intricate or compelling nuances of the U.S. cultural logic of blackness and whiteness in their “racialized” diacriticisms. They provide revealing canvases on which to detail the theoretical observations elaborated at some length in these pages. Yet, moreover, they provide equally rewarding opportunities to read the critical theoretical traditions deployed in this study against their own grains, returning to these traditions a critical scrutiny made possible precisely through considering the conditions of African American cultural production. In a phrase, I hope by their congress the value of theory and the value of Petry’s novels might be mutually revised in enabling ways.

The first section, “Violence and the Unseen,” elaborates the workings of value from its underside or deprivileged side; the second section, “Reasonings and Reasonableness,” undertakes a similar elaboration from the opposing side of configured privilege. Both entertain various (yet isomorphic) ways of formulating the schism between the valueless and the valuable: “black” and “white,” the “aliterate” and the “literate,” the “singing” and the “signing,” the “street” and the “academy.” Each of these binarisms, the claim is, serves as a concomitant site of racialization and value; each documents ways in which the meaning of race as a value proliferates at

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overlapping cultural points related to apparatuses of narration and dissemination.

“Violence and the Unsightly,” concerned primarily with the first terms of these several pairs, stakes out speculative territory afield, then, of points of U.S. culture considered valuable. The vantage of its discussion is that of the devalued racial category of blackness, its three chapters both rehearsing and querying a cultural logic that draws general lines of equivalence between these terms: “black,” “aliterate,” “singing,” the “street.”

Chapter I provides an account of the generation of value (and inevitably valuelessness) in which violence is posited as the subsequently occluded origin of value. This model understands value as a principle of order that concertedly overlooks its forceful, initial intervention into what it constructs as “disorder,” a principle that subsequently sublimates its ineluctable violence through the fetishization of boundaries. Both this violence and its sublimation are read in the concerns of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American texts, particularly Billie Holiday’s *Lady Sings the Blues*. Chapter II examines the way in which the investment of African American cultural expressivity in musical production (redacted as the “singing” voice) authors competing formations of value to those of the dominant U.S. culture, which understands itself as “white.” The “singing” voice challenges the primacy and exclusivity of literacy, the indomitable point of concern for Western bourgeois value whether civic, legal, or individual. Drawing on deconstructive theorizing, ethnomusicology, some historizations of the origins of market society, as well as Adorno’s cultural critique of jazz, this chapter troubles the dominant cultural authority of value invested in individual abilities to decipher and produce cursive script. Chapter III provides a protracted reading of Ann Petry’s 1946 novel *The Street* in the service of a textual elaboration of the theoretical perspectives broached so far. It examines the ways in which the fortunes of Lutie Johnson, Petry’s protagonist, can be productively charted by close readings of the symbolic weight and structural pressure the value of the singing voice brings to bear on the plot and narration of the novel.

“Reasonings and Reasonablenesses,” turning to the situation of the dominant racial perspective, pursues an alternate but related trajectory. It extends the consideration of the exigencies of value not by principally examining the obverse of privileged articulations

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of value and the disturbances these obverse forms generate, but by examining the guileful processes by which privileged articulations emerge and are maintained. It regards its speculative territory as the latter terms of the binarisms: “white,” the “literate,” the “signing,” the “academy.” Indeed, in the same way the singing voice is taken as an esteemed form of countersignificant African American cultural expressivity, so the humanist literary academy in its stewardship, accounting, and disseminating of a dominant cultural legacy is understood as an important point of valuable cultural articulation. According to the broad outlines of U.S. logic, the literary academy, like the singing voice, proves an important index of what these divergent cultures possess as well as represent. They, of course, are not the only such indices but do speak meaningfully to the situation of each other, precisely because the operations of cultural “value” make them seem such disparate formations. The academy and the African American singing voice are understood as radically opposed counterparts, one representing the height of reason, and the other its seeming nadir, which is to say, the intensity of ludic dissipation.

Chapter IV, the single chapter comprising this section, examines the overwhelming influence of New Criticism in establishing the protocols and values of the twentieth-century literary academy, protocols and value that until late in the twentieth century are exceedingly effective in exiling the “racial.” The chapter interrogates how New Criticism effectively masks its strong ties with the social and racial ideologies of the Southern Agrarians and Fugitives – which does not amount to claiming these protocols as somehow *inherently* oppressive or racially inflected but, instead, amounts to scrutinizing the circumstances out of which these protocols arise and the historically particular needs and silences they address for those championing them. How does race figure, this chapter asks, in the new configuration of institutional value that is the formative U.S. literary academy?

The final section, “Scopic and Phonic Economies,” foregrounds the claim that the very strict divisions and distinctions value aspires to establish and manage are never strictly enforceable nor entirely stable. This premise is, of course, a commonplace of poststructuralist theorizing – the indeterminacies of boundaries, borders, and frames. This section more openly contemplates the interdependencies of the competing values rehearsed so far, their inevitable converse, and the mutual information they share. For each, in effect, continually announces a crisis for the other. There are two chapters

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in this final section, which bring together the focuses on the “street” and the academy established separately in “Violence and the Unsightly” and “Reasonings and Reasonablenesses.” In doing so, they also draw together important strands of the earlier analysis by proposing scopic and phonic priorities as further indices of the racialized field of value known as “blackness” and “whiteness” in U.S. contexts.

Chapter V continues to examine the protocols of the U.S. literary academy; however, in this instance from the vantage of ascendant poststructuralist theory, since the currency of poststructuralism establishes the primary critical consensus in the post-1960s academy. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that, regardless of this change in critical fortunes, notwithstanding the apparent radical turn to Otherness, the critical and institutional formations poststructuralism represents reiterate articulations of value that do not even *theoretically* challenge the matrix of race and value assumed by its institutional predecessors. This irony is uncovered in a reading of the exemplary poststructuralist debate of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Barbara Johnson, in which all of these celebrated poststructuralists remain so beguiled by economies of visual exchange they overlook the crucial production of sound by which Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” their object of analysis, actually resolves itself. Chapter VI returns from academic formations and debates to the “street,” understood as a metaphorical site of blackness in its exile from privileged forms of race and reasonableness. This chapter focuses on Ann Petry’s 1953 *The Narrows* in order to elaborate the way in which sight and sound, scopic and phonic orientations, are profoundly implicated in the racial antipathies “black” and “white,” the “aliterate” and the “literate,” the “singing” and the “signing,” the “street” and the “academy” already pursued throughout the study.

As one easily recognizes, the originality of this project does not arise from any of its basic assumptions – which are, in fact, heuristic points of departure long recognized in a humanist academy that has both embraced and resisted various stages of escalating structuralist and poststructuralist thought. Neither the diacritical relation of terms posed as binary opposites nor notions of the instability of the boundaries assigned to regulating these relations are novel points of critical departure. Nevertheless, what is original in the forthcoming speculations, I contend, is an elaboration of the way these principles aid in rethinking the network of relations constituting the

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world of value implicit in the U.S. logic of race, in particular the network of relations that would put into conversation such an unlikely pair as the street and the academy. What possible cogent relation could the ragged improvisational melismas of African American vocal performance and the balanced deliberations of New Critical protocols bear to one other? What mutual information could possibly pass between them? In what ways could meditations on the curiosities of academic protocols be aligned with the vivid, racially tense worlds of Ann Petry's novels? This study attempts to answer these questions by pursuing a trajectory from the street to the academy, and vice versa. And, just as the originality of the answers presented here does not inhere in the presuppositions on which they may be based, neither does it inhere in pointed historical renditions of varying U.S. formations of "blackness" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This type of work is done admirably by various other studies and only in the broadest of strokes in *Blackness and Value*. The heart of the matter lies instead, I hope, in adequately approaching what appears to be a cultural constant of "blackness" – however much historically contingent – that holds fast those within the designation as if "joined together by the memory of the music and the dancing" (Petry, *The Street* 226).

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PART ONE

VIOLENCE AND THE UNSIGHTLY

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*FIGURES OF VIOLENCE: VALUATION,
AUTHORIZATION, EXPENDITURES OF
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN, AND OTHER
WAYS OF TELLING*

Within the first few pages of her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holiday (with William Dufty) recounts an entrepreneurial enterprise she undertakes at the age of sixteen. The enterprise brings Holiday quickly to the point of a confrontation, one in which she learns to negotiate the complexities and ritual importance of boundaries and borders to her advantage. Sixteen-year-old Holiday, rather than scrub neighborhood steps for a nickel, buys her own supplies and demands an exorbitant fifteen cents for each set of steps she would scrub. Her demands are met with incredulity, but Holiday is fortified with the understanding that

[a]ll these bitches were lazy. I knew it and that's where I had them. They didn't care how filthy their damn houses were inside, as long as those white steps were clean. Sometimes I'd bring home as much as ninety cents a day. I even made as high as \$2.10 – that's fourteen kitchen or bathroom floors and as many sets of steps. (10)

Holiday, big for her age, “with big breasts, big bones, a big fat healthy broad, that's all” (9), keenly understands and exploits the paramount significance given to markers setting off inside from outside, as well as her position in relation to such markers. Across the boundary – the set of steps – that she will scrub and maintain “white,” Holiday faces her adversarial benefactor and plays upon her own intuitive knowledge of both the significance attributed to the boundary and the relative positions she and her adversary occupy in relation to the boundary, one inside and one outside.