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'BLACKNESS', MODERNITY, AND THE IDEOLOGY OF VISIBILITY IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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In a bold departure from the established critical norm regarding the Harlem Renaissance and its relation to modernism and modernity, George Hutchinson's in-depth study, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Harvard, 1995), seeks not to discuss the movement's success or failure (Huggins, 1971; Lewis, 1979; 1981) but rather to open up the possibility of examining what he has called the 'complicated cultural drama' (Hutchinson, 1995: 25)[1] within which the movement took place. But even as it posits a critique of the stated racial boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance, Hutchinson's study yet elides its own consideration of 'blackness', which underlies its exploration of the meaning of interracialism within the movement, or the objective manifestation of the 'cultural drama' of which he speaks. While it opens new ground with regard to the cultural significance of 'race' during this time, Hutchinson's re-articulation also stops short of the rigorous interrogation of 'race' necessary to undergird a re-conceptualization of the Harlem Renaissance powerful enough to shake its firmly entrenched critical and cultural position, and provide its proponents with not only a new vision of this moment in literary history, but one that could also provide a more profound and nuanced understanding of the deeper significance of its inherent and multiracial modernism. That cultural position, as the foundation of a black cultural nationalism derived from an inter-generational African-American conflict that ended with the valorization of what Martin Favor (Favor, 1999) identifies as the 'authentic blackness' of those designated as the black 'folk'—that is, those US blacks who are southern, rural, and poor—itself contains an uncritiqued and uncontested articulation of 'race' at its heart, what Michael Awkward has described as a situation harboring 'ghosts of a nostalgic essentialism' (Awkward, 1995: 6).

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[1] For other studies of the relation between race and modernity, see James de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge UP, 1990); Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994); Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994); Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1987); Ann Douglass, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (Paris: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1995); and Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina P, 2004).

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When explored in relation to Hutchinson's consideration of interracialism in the Harlem Renaissance, Favor's 'authentic blackness' figures as the dividing line which measures the distance between white cultural contributions to the movement, and those which are considered specifically black contributions—underscoring the existence of two distinct modern hemi/spheres whose interconnectedness Hutchinson's analysis of interracialism is positioned to examine. But while Favor's 'authentic blackness' divides white and Euro-American from black and diasporic African, it also helps to further a rigid understanding of the significance of 'blackness' and the certainty of 'whiteness' that refuses, in this context, to consider the meaning of modernity and its importance to a more complete knowledge of interracialism within the movement. In other words, to analyze the notion of 'interracialism' in the Harlem Renaissance, as Hutchinson has outlined, it is first necessary to assume the 'racial', and, within it, a certain fixity and stability regarding singular constructions of race, such as 'black' and 'white.' By assuming the stability of these terms, however, Hutchinson also simultaneously reinforces the binary logic that, through their opposition, both creates them and holds them in place as corporeal essence, to be accessed through what Robyn Wiegman has identified as 'economies of the visible', creating a 'violent equation between the idea of "race" and the 'black" body' (Wiegman, 1995: 3–4). But this fixity and stability of signification is also only possible when race, at least in the form of 'whiteness' and 'blackness', is held not only in relation to the visible, but also in a kind of Yin-Yang opposition, in which each term exerts the same amount of semantic force with regard to the other. This oppositional binary logic is precisely the rhetorical condition that, in his emphasis on the interracialism of the Harlem Renaissance, Hutchinson seeks to argue against. But because the 'racial' must also be assumed in seeking to examine what is 'inter*racial' within the Harlem Renaissance, this racial opposition cannot be dismantled at its core, and is thus also unable to adequately address the role of 'race' within modernism and modernity. The cultural meanings of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' in this instance do not disappear simply because the issue of 'race' cannot be satisfactorily addressed. Instead, they go below the surface, where their oppositional relation is both obscured and solidified, so that the racial divide they represent seems merely a reflection of an immutable, de facto status quo. Consequently, because the cultural meanings of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' are in this way hidden within the notion of interraciality, it also becomes impossible to denaturalize them, thereby ensuring that unless this situation is in some way radically altered, the role of race within modernism and modernity, understood through the exploration of interracialism, can only be partially examined. Thus, the new vision of the Harlem Renaissance suggested by analysis of its underlying interracialism can only become fully possible to the extent that the conventional binary, white/black, is also pulled apart to expose the cultural significance of the opposition between the two terms, through which the hidden nexus by which they are joined comes violently to the fore.

As a result, even in an argument such as Hutchinson's, which on its face purports to move beyond accepted critical boundaries in its examination of what might be conventionally understood as white participation in a black literary and cultural context, the historical reality of the Harlem Renaissance, its interracialism, its arguments over representation, representativeness, and the most 'authentic' way to articulate

black identity, its debates over the meaning of 'blackness' and the most true-to-life depiction of black experience, are made to give way to a cultural nationalist model that would reduce this cacophony of approaches and perspectives to one voice, whose primary function is to bring a culturally viable understanding of a true and pure 'blackness' into being. Hutchinson's effort to contradict the ascendancy of this single voice, while powerful, cannot completely dismantle it (so that the significance of interracialism may be fully comprehended in this context) without a concomitant and rigorous interrogation of the binary logic—the dichotomy between 'white' and 'black'—upon which it is based. Viewed from this perspective, Hutchinson's analysis of interracialism in the Harlem Renaissance reveals a host of unexplored questions, lying deep below its interrogation of interracialism in the movement, and urging us to consider more carefully the meaning of 'race' in relation to modernism, modernity and the Harlem Renaissance: what exactly is the meaning of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' in the Harlem Renaissance? What do 'white' and 'black' mean in the context of modernism and modernity? How does the modern sensibility inform, interrogate, interact with and/or speak to these seemingly immutable terms? What is the relation between modernity and race?

Such questions are crucial to an exploration of the role played by race in modernism, yet they also raise very difficult problems whose impact reaches far beyond the specific context in which they occur. Because issues of race and its relation to modernism are also encompassed by deep-seated, firmly entrenched cultural significations that have traditionally placed race and modernism on opposing sides of a seemingly unbridgeable disciplinary divide, the effort to transcend this difficulty is from the outset plagued by the discursive and critical power of these significations to create and maintain cultural meaning. And because this rhetorical power drives the consideration of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' by which these issues are described deep below the surface, it also, in so doing, renders them almost impossible to disengage and interpret. Paul Gilroy has studied this type of racial situation as an instance of what he calls 'raciology', or a dangerous form of 'race-thinking' that 'brings the virtual realities of "race" to dismal and destructive life' (Gilroy, 2002: 1). That 'raciology', in Gilroy's terms, produces a *virtual* racial reality is important here: when the rhetorical power of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' is driven underground, it creates another, hidden reality that has no foundation in actual, face-to-face time, but which yet exerts an almost superhuman influence over the terms within which such actual reality is encountered and experienced. This 'virtual' reality is, then, superimposed upon actual reality in such a way that the seams of this superimposition, while certainly there, are no longer evident. As Gilroy observes, 'Raciology has saturated the discourses in which it circulates. It cannot be readily re-signified or de-signified…' (Gilroy, 2002: 2). Yet unless the deeper meaning that 'whiteness' and 'blackness' represent within this 'virtual' reality is recognized and subjected to in-depth analysis, access to the invisible boundaries that pertain between modernism and race can never be obtained, and analyses that seek to consider what may be found in the gap which is the divide between them will not cease to struggle for critical relevance.

Gilroy is correct in establishing that such an examination must begin with a complicated analysis of the cultural reliance on a stable notion of 'race' in the West. While

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'race' continues to be held as an essential truth of the body, it is impossible to move beyond the material reality represented by that body into an understanding of the 'virtual'racial realities by which it is translated into cultural meanings within what I describe as an ideology of visibility (Wiegman, 1995: 3)² in which the body is always necessarily and inevitably implicated, and from which no one can escape. This ideology of visibility also necessarily entraps both 'self' and 'other' in a tangled maze of representations grounded in a notion of corporeal essence, by which they resemble reality, while yet being completely divorced from it in actual terms, as Samira Kawash describes:

… the modern epistemology of race posits a distinctive being, an essence… as the basis for racial distinction, and yet at the extreme this essence is revealed to be nothing more than the distinction itself (Kawash, 1997: 148).

Within this ideology of visibility, then, what is 'real' becomes only that which can be seen, whether or not what is seen is the same as what actually is. In Wiegman's terms, the body therefore becomes the point at which the 'virtual' and the actual collide—and clash—as the body must necessarily become the 'primary readable "text"' in the absence of any true reliance on actual reality itself' (Wiegman, 1995: 8). This is because, Wiegman asserts, 'the visible has a long, contested, and highly contradictory role as the primary vehicle for making race "real" in the United States' (Wiegman, 1995: 21). By moving beyond the body-as-truth in the effort to examine this ideology of visibility, as Michael Awkward and numerous other critics have argued,³ postmodern perspectives have challenged the belief that the idea of 'race' represents a fundamental essence and purity recognized only in the body's visible existence. But while such critics have asserted that this essentialized racial idea has been forced, finally, to give way to another, more complicated understanding, in which 'race' becomes the result of complex social forces that bring it into being, and for which it serves a constitutive purpose, they also agree tha+t despite new knowledges in this vein, 'race' and 'blackness' remain still very much an almost symbiotic pair.⁴ In Gilroy's analysis, this morass is brought about because both 'black and white are bonded together by the mechanisms of 'race' that estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity' (Gilroy, 2002: 5). And because these 'mechanisms' are so completely intertwined, and since they rely on a stable conception of a visible 'blackness' that

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² In a related perspective, Robyn Wiegman describes this as an 'economy of the visible'. While Wiegman's terminology remains extremely useful to an analysis of the constructed nature of race in the cultures of the West, I pefer to use the notion of ideology in this regard. While 'economy' suggests the parameters of an ordered system within which the visible becomes an important component of signification, I believe that the notion of ideology, which represents the foundational beliefs or the social needs and or aspirations of a given group, more accurately describes the reality of race and racial understanding in the cultures of the West.

³ Ibid. See also Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Color Line: Racial Passing in 20th Century US Literature and Culture* (New Americanists), Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke UP, 2000. Kawash; Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (New Americanists) Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke UP, 1999; Teresa Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson, MS: U P of Mississippi) 2004. Wiegman; Ann DuCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

⁴ See Favor, Wiegman, Awkward, DuCille, Kawash. For an analysis of the relation between race, gender and the visual, see Wiegman.

implies, in its essence as 'blackness', an equally stable yet *in*visible conception of 'whiteness', 'blackness' becomes the pivot upon which the politics of race and color is made to turn, in those cultural contexts where the problem of race holds high importance. Thus, as Teresa Zackodnik points out, whether it is 'guarded on one side of the color line or the other, "blackness" continues to go carefully policed in American culture and elsewhere in the West…' (Zackodnik, 2004: 46).[5]

When the ground for understanding the concept of 'interracialism' must be the positing of a racial idea given reality by the terms 'white' and 'black', held in oppositional and forceful relation within a virtual reality tied to a material and seeming truth, and these terms are destabilized or, as Wiegman has argued, 'deterritorialized' (Wiegman, 1995: 8) then not only the idea of 'interracialism', but also its cultural significance must be brought under critical scrutiny. This would imply, as Wiegman identifies, a deterritorialization that 'entails examining the history, function and structure of visibility that underwrites the binary formation', and produces 'the epistemology of perception that simultaneously equates the racial body with a perceptible blackness, while defining, in its absence, whiteness as whatever an African blackness is not' (Wiegman, 1995: 8).

If 'interracialism' is taken as the ground for a critique of authenticity and the singular black voice found within accepted understandings of the Harlem Renaissance, then, it becomes impossible to address the complicated cultural underpinnings of the movement because in itself it does not solicit the simultaneous examination of the terms upon which its recognition lies that such 'deterritorialization' would demand. In the absence of this necessity, although it is still possible to discuss the conflicts, disagreements and inconsistencies between white and black contributions to and articulations of the movement, this is for the most part only in previously established discursive terms—which always seem to turn on the binary logic Hutchinson would desire to eschew, in that they carefully maintain the dichotomy between white and black leanings, tendencies, representations, and/or realities. This is not to critique the obvious value of Hutchinson's work, or that of other critics whose work may rely on the same binary logic, nor to suggest that this lack represents a kind of fatal flaw by which such work would necessarily be undermined. Rather, it is to assert that the effort to move critical examination of the Harlem Renaissance beyond its traditional parameters by considering the place of 'whiteness' within it, and to open up critical consideration of modernism and modernity in relation to the problem of 'race', can go only so far in the attempt to construct new boundaries within this time in literary history. It is not enough to effect a radical and transformative change in the way in which either movement is perceived, because it leaves the essential dichotomy between 'white' and 'black'—by which modernism and the Harlem Renaissance are covertly and respectively described—in place, rather than seeking to understand what may lie beneath this received discursive, often material and visual reality, and what compelling

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[5] See also Awkward, 1995: 6–7. He writes 'The arguments over just what constitutes adequate expressions of difference are so hotly contested that, if we are forthright in our investigations of criteria used to determine artistic or interpretive "authenticity, " we must acknowledge that the outcome of such debates confirms merely the effectiveness of strategies to insist that these criteria are signs of indisputable truth or purity, not the existence of some irreducible essence itself.'

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new insights the examination of these unexplored depths could bring to our under-
standing of one or the other of modernism or the Harlem Renaissance, or both.

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