

**REPRESENTING MODERNITIES: INDIGENOUS AND GLOBAL
TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN
INTELLECTUAL TRADITION**

A thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2022**

CONCLUSION

This dissertation, in its aim to study modernity and its manifold representations in the African American intellectual tradition starts with W. E. B. Du Bois and ends with bell hooks. In each of the writers chosen, the emphasis is on the role of the visual—that ranges from ‘seeing’ and ‘showing’ to the representations of it in art—and its reinvention by each of them in unique ways. In this endeavour to draw a line of tradition where each writer responds, writes back, as well as reinvents the other’s use of the visual, representations of modernity come up with distinctive passages to achieve the same. What is evident here are individual attempts to intervene into the discourse of modernity through visualities.

Chapter 1 frames the methodological perspectives adopted in the dissertation and maps the changing meanings of modernity over time. The limitations of modernity and the contestations posed to it using the prefix ‘post’ nevertheless also indicate its lasting seductions in academic discourse. In the context of this dissertation, African American modernity emerges as an alternative model to the West’s self-definition of itself—and only itself—as modern. To this end, the focus is on the different indices through which specific modules of modernity are proposed. In analyzing the arbitrary—and often prejudiced—attribution of the modern to certain geographies and races, this chapter opens up way to not just categorizing alternative models but alternative ways of understanding modernity. In doing this, how apparently non-modern cultures appropriated the putative benefits of modernity and channelled their understandings of modernity become important. In its problematization of these classifications and categories, the chapter provides a template to understanding the non-western modules of modernity.

Chapter 2 takes up W. E. B. Du Bois as the first author to consider in the intellectual tradition that this thesis seeks to trace. Du Bois’ placement is important from the perspective of the visual turn that the African American writer takes in their attempt to assert the African American identity. The buzzword being modernity, visual vocabulary becomes an important frame through which the writer thinks it necessary to incorporate cartoons, sketches etc. into the writings of the time. Magazines and journals, and through these, black people’s participation in the intellectual scene of the time, provided a platform through which the modernity of a subverted group was asserted. Journalism became a medium for Du Bois to appropriate the benefits of print modernity

and make an African American people aware of their African heritage. In focusing on select writings of *The Crisis*, the study is cognizant of Du Bois' role in presenting an African American past through a respectful portrayal of the black culture. In his polyphonic writings, drawing largely from history, sociology and autobiographical elements, the focus is centred on the African American experience. Against a culture denied, Du Bois retraces a culture which was always there, and which has left sizeable evidence. The authority and influence of African art on modern art forms, Sorrow Songs which have sustained generations with spirituality, sadness and hope alike are evidence of the cultural repertoire of the African American people.

Chapter 3 takes Richard Wright's works to establish visualities in the sense of both an act (of seeing) and the media which perpetuates it. The chapter in considering his preoccupation with the debates between 'seeing' and 'knowing' examines his reworking of Du Bois' "double consciousness" in "double vision". This perspective establishes race as an ocular fact. In his writings, this investment on the ocular ranges from consideration of the politics of 'seeing' to incorporation of documentary photographs in one of his works and hence attempting to 'show' the African American picture—through photographs—from an African American perspective. Even while dealing with a form of writing very common in the African American literature of his time, he reinvents it in a way that defies white sanction and assumes self-authentication as a key. In incorporating 'imaginings' in his autobiographical experience, he proposes these as rooted in the black experience, if not derived directly from his individual experience.

Chapter 4 considers Baldwin's writings as a genre that contests the popular protest fiction of the day. In his fictional and non-fictional oeuvre, Baldwin—as the chapter goes to claim—examines issues rather than just stating them. Masculinity and its manifold expectations, nationalism and racialization of space are issues which are read in conjunction with western modernity. The writer articulates the responses to these—in terms of both successes and failures—and concludes that the African American experience is a unique experience that cannot be shoved under an African or an American one. Alternative spaces and alternative sexualities and the possibilities of these thriving in a masculinist and racial American landscape are examined by Baldwin in these writings. The bitterness, hostility and violence that characterize black settings and black interpersonal relationships are attributed by Baldwin to an erosion of man's

sexuality. The black man's existence—in terms of everyday actions like walking the streets as well as owning his sexuality—is incompatible to the expectations of western modernity. In conversational pieces such as the one with Nikki Giovanni used in the chapter, the latter accuses him—and his understanding of violence unleashed on black women—of exonerating the black man from taking any responsibility for the fraught relationships he shares with his wife and children. Hence, even though masculinity and its expectations crippling the black man's identity are brought to the discussion, the woman question remains largely unaddressed.

In selecting Toni Morrison in chapter 5, this study tries to see representation of children and children's experiences—in both everyday instances and historical moments—in the visual medium. For the purpose, the representation of the child as active agent receive focus. In order to situate children as active agents in historical moments, photographs from the *Brown v Board of Education* case, 1954 are used by Morrison to foreground children's experiences. However, the writer's reimagining of these photographs through re-visioning those moments and incorporating fictional dialogues is a venture that is unique in its visual engagement. This aesthetic of mnemonic revision makes a case for black modernity in centre staging the experiences of a certain category of a certain age-group traditionally ignored in discussions of major historical moments. To this end, the child's autonomy is also the given sustained attention in this discussion. For the purpose, a child navigating her ordinary day constituting of ordinary events populate the picture book chosen as the primary text. The emphasis, in both cases, is the reinvention of education attuned to the changing demands of a contextualized modernity. Here, the focus is on empathy as an essential element of education, to be insisted upon in the formative years of every human being. In illustrating and photographing the child, the writer ventures into the visual domain as the locus of modernity shifts to education and the use of technology. In 're-membering' and 're-visioning'—as these texts do—strategic modernities of reinscribing the lost and silenced find expression.

In bell hooks, the last writer selected for the purpose of this dissertation, the black writer's engagement with visualities extends to art criticism. Taking up the role of the art critic, hooks' critical engagements with black art foregrounds a black modernity which acknowledges the role of women artists in revolutionizing black visual politics. bell

hooks as the last in line of the tradition—at once specific, limited and non- that this thesis maps, provides examples of indigenous art practices ranging from photography to architecture among southern households. This is contested against the binaries of western modernity which separates the professional and vernacular engagements of art. In a way, this is a reassertion of W. E. B. Du Bois' efforts at making a culture proud of its cultural heritage. On the other hand, hooks' thesis on modernity though rests on decolonizing the mind of a subjugated culture. Acknowledging and exercising one's creativity is considered as the first step to achieve this.

While racism and its manifold representations seek historical validation, the black writer's engagement with modernity has established an intellectual tradition that draws from the putative benefits of modernity and one's indigenous roots. Within this tradition, the visual engagements of these writers—and each, with separate and unique ways—legitimize the claim to study modernity and its representations in multiplicity. In each writer analysed, the overbearing phenomenon is how the African American culture has offered a template of modernity for further negotiation first at the indigenous and later, on a global level. Each community or culture—black, American, African American—it seems has a right to modernity, though not of a single template or a specific geography.