

ABSTRACT

This dissertation attempts to study the visual engagements of five African American writers. In the process, a line of intellectual tradition can be traced—through W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and bell hooks—in which each responds to the other as well as to the putative benefits of modernity. In these unique experiments, the African American writers propose a thesis of black modernity that is distinct from its western counterpart. It argues for African American variants of modernity which build up from black history and aesthetic practices. The debates on what constitutes the modern, the possibilities of multiple models of modernity in the term ‘alternative modernities,’ the unique sense(s) and privilege of the past, the binaries of indigenous and global, the place and role of the black artist in visual studies are questioned and analyzed. The study is premised on theories of visualities—in terms of both ways of seeing and art representations—and modernity studies which, even in its over exhausted usage have lasting seductions in academia and research. The selection of primary material for the text ranges from journalistic writings to documentary photographs and critical writing on black visualities.

Keywords: visual, modernity, indigenous, alternative modernities, representation.