

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps modern, modernity and modernization are the most used and abused terms in academia and research. From the traditional debates on what constitutes modern and the non-modern, interest has shifted to the very idea of the classification in the first place. From vague categorisation to relegation of certain cultures to subjecting the terms to considerations and reconsiderations, the seduction of these terms has never outmoded. What is perhaps even more interesting is that with the various debates surrounding it and even transcending it (take, for instance, the terms post-modern, post-modernity), modernity, much like Habermas suggested, is an unfinished project, both as a historical phenomenon and in academia. It is commonplace to inspect and more so identify modernity in cultures and practices that have forever been categorised in a realm that is everything except modern. The context chosen is the African American intellectual tradition and their participation in and creation of modernities vis-à-vis visualities encompassing both the act of visualizing as well as the medium involved in it.

The aims of the dissertation are

- (i) to show how the term ‘alternative’ prefixed to modernity can alert us to the existence of non-western, non-Enlightenment models of the rather ambivalent term ‘modernity;’
- (ii) to look at the possibility of ‘constructing’ a black revisionist tradition that either refuses to accept the putative benefits of modernity or antedates some of its most crucial attributes by tracing them to non-Western sources, notably Asian or African;
- (iii) to reflect on an implicit erasure of possibilities in an apparent colonialism of possibilities;
- (iv) to show how one group’s road to modernity can be categorised as different, not necessarily as a replication of the western model, and certainly not inferior/subordinate to it; and
- (v) to show the African American participation in visualities as a challenge to being ‘represented’ by the West as well as a claim to modernity through participation in the different media of visual arts.

## Review of Literature

As can be seen above, the thesis revolves around the key words: “modernity,” “African American literature,” “alternative modernities,” “visualities”. As a project that spans around these words, the review of literature has been divided into the following sections:

(a) On Modernity: This cluster of works range from consideration of the terms like “modernity” and “alternative modernities” to the possibilities and impossibilities of it. In each of these cases, notions of the lingering charms of modernity and the paradoxes that inform it are both addressed and questioned. The changing demands on modernity with respect to globalization, particular modernities peculiar to particular geographies are an overwhelming interest. The works include: Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Habitations of Modernity* (2002) , *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization* (2009) by Saurabh Dube (ed); *Shared Histories of Modernity* (2009) by Huri Islamoğlu and Peter C. Perdue (eds.); *Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: A View From India* (2011) by Satya P. Mohanty(ed); *Alternative Modernities* (2001) by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (ed).; Partha Chatterjee’s “Our Modernity” (1997); Gerard Delanty’s “The Impossibility of Modernity: Cultural Crystallization and the Problem of Contingency” (2002).

Appadurai’s book offers a cultural study of globalization and the impact of electronic media and mass migration on it. Electronic propinquity shaping up course of events in the modern world is an overwhelming presence in the book. Chakrabarty’s text offers an understanding that no society exists as a tabula rasa. It has its own complexities and intricacies which go way back to the past and are contenders for modernity. Dube’s edited collection questions the ‘ruptures’ (say, between the past and present, traditional and modern) that are popular in modernity discourses. Including aspects like vernacular pasts and metropolitan histories alike, this collection of essays focuses on the enchantments of modernity in each case. *Shared Histories*, while focusing on three specific empires, China, India and Ottoman is a commentary on how cultures in imperial settings negotiated with (western) modernity and sees these cultures were so dynamic and complex in themselves. In Mohanty’s edited collection too, modernity is traced to non-western roots. While rooting it in an Indian text, this collection engages in numerous ways to critique the distorted lens through which non-western cultures are seen and

easily categorized as non-modern. While Gaonkar's collection resists any tendency that declares that modernity has ended and Partha Chatterjee's essay declares that the only universal definition of modernity would be to use its methods of reason to identify particular modernities, Delanty articulates the 'impossibility' of modernity when confronted with cultural crystallization.

(b)On the Visual/ Seeing: This set of works reflect on the act of seeing in general as well as the variations of the visual media and arts which inform the modernities of particular cultures. The important works include: Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1997); John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1973); Nicholas Mirzoeff's *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999); Jasmine Nichole Cobb's *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (2005); *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (2012) by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (eds); Shawn Michelle Smith's *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (2013), Denise Murrell's *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (2018).

Sontag includes in her book both the act of photographing and the eternity it grants to transient objects and moments and also the particular fascination of photographers for certain subjects (say, melancholic faces, poverty etc.). Berger's work builds up on the act of 'seeing,' its centrality to every experience and encounter and how the visual accentuates as well as changes meanings when interplayed with words. Mirzoeff engages with the technologies of modern visualities (as in television and internet) while also taking cognizance of older art forms in the visual culture like paintings. Important aspects here are the interfaces of gender and race with visualities, and the observation that tendency to visualize all experiences is overwhelmingly modern. Jasmine Nichole Cobbs makes a study of 'images' of black women—daguerreotypes before the invention of camera—which they arranged for themselves in the nineteenth century. These were "self-proclaimed ladies and gentlemen of African descent" (Cobbs 1) who clearly detested the representations of the Africans in the light of slavery and the images of deprivation and sallowness which accompanied it. Contrary to this, the women posed in fine clothing, put colour on their cheeks and posed with books in the frame—all as statements of fashion and literacy. *Pictures and Progress* traces the making and shaping of an African American identity through the photographing venture. Race and

representation figure predominantly here. It shifts focus away from the photographer and recognized the roles of the subject as well as the viewer in the interpretation of meanings. *At the Edge of Sight* shifts attention to how photography is as much about the ‘unseen’ as about what is normally visible. The possibilities of numerous connotations informed by one’s cultural backdrop and personal experiences are dealt with elaborately. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019) is of particular importance in lending a perspective to this dissertation, in ‘unlearning imperialism’ and reversing the gaze of a very ‘imperial’ shutter by questioning issues of representation when it is spearheaded by the West. Denise Murrell’s *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (2018) considers the figure of black women as integral to modern art. This work is based on the writer’s (who is an art historian) curation for an exhibition at Columbia’s Wallach Art Gallery which traces the inspiration generated by black women to modern artists.

(c) On Modernity in the African American and Indigenous Contexts: This category includes works which focus on tracing the roots of modernity away from the West. These works include: Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1987), Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Mary Lefkowitz’s *Not Out of Africa* (1996), Frank M. Kirkland’s “Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black” (1997), Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999).

Bernal’s book proposes an alternative hypothesis to placing the roots of ancient civilization in the West. Gilroy’s text deals with the paradoxes of black intellectuals in their position as products of the West (and its education) and their criticisms directed towards it. Lefkowitz’s book deals with the dangers involved in over-romanticization of Afrocentricism, to the point that it distorts history. Kirkland’s essay is committed to acknowledgement of the centrality of the past to black modernity. *Decolonizing Methodologies* recognizes how methodologies are colonized and suited to western modes of research. This also follows that indigenous research needs decolonization of these methodologies to tell an alternative story about themselves.

These three categories provide a roadmap to the dissertation in terms of modernity’s intersection with varied cultures, the varied cultures’ (here, African American) particular modernities, the place of the ‘visual’ in African American culture

with the onslaught of professional photography and art museums, the unique articulation of African American artists, both professional and amateur in visual aesthetics and most importantly, a perpetual 'going back to the past' to establish their theses of modernity.

## **Corpus**

The writers selected in this dissertation, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and bell hooks, while not consciously following a tradition, are nevertheless writing back to each other. This 'writing back' is established in terms of their engagement with modernity and its interface with visualities. Since these are prolific writers, the major texts selected remain rooted in their exercise at 'visualities' that is distinctively modern and African American at the same time. The lapses and questions in one are answered in the other. Du Bois' famous compilation at Paris Exposition of 1900, proudly displaying educated, middle-class African Americans occludes the sharecropper and mammy in the North, struggling with western modernity. This is picked up by Wright, hence displaying the different experiences of modernity when racial construct is a determiner for the same. Wright, in his emphasis to 'protest' leaves out examining the crippling sense of identity in African Americans, always subjected to the white's gaze. Baldwin examines this and much more, in terms of sexuality, masculinity and even spaces which are racialized and either 'seen' by the white eye or articulated in ways that pacify the western hallmarks regarding the same. Both Du Bois and Baldwin are vocal about the need to educate and love the African American child. Toni Morrison situates the child at the centre of a historical moment (desegregation). In her engagement with visualities, she includes photographs and illustrations in the texts selected, situating the child at the forefront and proposing how categories, in terms of gender, race, (and here) age etc. are required to be treated differently in terms of their encounters with modernity. The issue of representation is intrinsic to visuality: who represents? What is represented? How is it represented? etc. Heaving under a long history of being represented by the West, African American artists, when participating in visualities, face the twin challenge of being recognized by the West as well as to maintain its own distinctiveness. bell hooks' works on visual criticism provide an understanding of the absences of black (female voices) in criticism and an acknowledgement of say, Du Bois's belief in a modernity rooted in the past by her

consideration of vernacular (and unprofessional) practices in visualities by African Americans.

## **Methodology**

The methodology applied is a considered use of ideology and representation in order to provide a reading of the texts and situate the texts within the precinct of modernity. The perspective that emerges clears the ground to resist a defined modernity and situate the texts within the realm of experimentation with genres. The past is shown not to delegitimize routes to modernity but as operating seamlessly with the present. The works selected are situated within a frame where black modernities resist a homogenous attribution to one line of thought or one set of ideology. The African-American experience in its hyphenation acknowledges a multiplicity of identity, literature, art and so on. This multiplicity of voices is asserted both explicitly and implicitly in the texts that come out from the black intellectual tradition. The thesis consciously adopts a perspective that acknowledges this hyphenation. The major perspective that informs this dissertation is: remembering and preserving; the potency of visualities to accomplish these is extensive.

Chapter 1, titled “Multiplicity in Modernity: Representations,” is the frame chapter that offers a working model to explore the possibilities of multiple modernities, going through transformations and developments, as well as abandonments and terminations. Important points highlighted here are: the (often arbitrary) criteria of western modernity, challenges to modernity and resistance to the idea of a defined modernity, the interface of race with modernity studies, the vogue of alternative modernities and the place of the visual in African American modernities. The chapter explores and historicizes the key-words of the thesis and establishes a common ground or convergences so that individual writers chosen to highlight a tradition can be seen experimenting with these ideas.

Chapter 2, titled “W. E. B. Du Bois: Modernity in Black Lives,” places W. E. B. Du Bois at the beginning of the African American intellectual tradition discussed in this dissertation. This positioning again is in the light of the fact that he is at the forefront of a line of thinkers who has placed Africa as a potent cultural matrix in itself, shunning any relation to the West. The thesis of DuBois’s modernity is centred on “visual vocabulary”,

a term borrowed from Amy Helene Kirschke's *Art in Crisis*, that he uses overwhelmingly throughout his journalistic career. Africa and her cultural repertoire are a striking presence in his incorporation of the visual (cartoons, sketches, paintings) during his editorial role in *The Crisis*. Kirkland's essay "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black" is brought into the discussion because it brings to the fore the distinctive views of black thinkers and writers on what the African American past does for its people. The essay is important in its explication and critique of the ontology of the past, and Du Bois' distinctive take on it.

Chapter 3, titled "'The Heroism of Vision': Richard Wright and Documentary Modernity," examines Richard Wright's lifelong interest with 'vision': from 'seeing' (and consequently 'othering') to his forays into documentary photography and participating in the knowledge-power equation that the benefits of modernity entail. Wright formulates a thesis of modernity by insisting on the "heroism of vision" (Sontag 65). That is to say that the ocular is a potent medium which shapes the module of modernity. Wright appropriates this medium and formulates an alternative modernity that builds up from the experiences of the African Americans and narrated and documented by one of them, in terms of participation in visualities.

Chapter 4, titled "'I am as the Other Sees Me': James Baldwin and the Unintentional Collusion of the Oppressed," intends to focus on Baldwin and highlight him as a vanguard of a genre of writing that was a break from its contemporary protest fiction. Baldwin reshaped the contours of scholarly inquiry and moved away from stating of the problem to examining it. His manifold focus on streets and prisons, sexuality and morality, spaces and violence, sexual abuse and masculinity introduced a genre of writing that attributes violence and aggression in characters, dynamics of interpersonal relationships and a sense/loss of the self to racial prejudices general and specific against African Americans. The section on 'racialization of space' shows how the Enlightenment model of modernity in ascribing civilization and sanity to certain spaces (geographies) is extended to the microscopic level in the American scene in say ghetto, suburbs, inner city.

Chapter 5, titled "Picturing the Child: Toni Morrison and Mnemonic Visuality," studies Morrison's forays into children's literature with special reference to two books—one with illustrations and the other with photographs. Children are shown to be active



agents of change. Her visual experiment here includes an experimentation with photographs by contextualizing it within a certain period of history (*Brown v Board of Education*, 1954) and infusing these with fictional dialogues. A line of tradition is also deciphered in an interest on children's (liberal) education since the time of Baldwin and children as specific targets of visual material going back to W.E.B. DuBois's stints at various magazines.

Chapter 6, titled "'A Technology of the Sacred': bell hooks and Visual Politics in Art and Snapshots," concerns itself with African American participation in and problematization of visual aesthetics through hook's collections of essays. It also explores the quest for decolonization by a people through their participation in art and creative practices. hooks questions apparently liberal idea of art which chooses to evade black art, black critical writings on art and most of all, black female voices. To this extent the chapter discusses the ideas such as "desire for the Other" rooted in "imperialist nostalgia" and "getting a bit of the Other". In the same vein, cultural icons (like Madonna), black female artists (like Allison Saar) are chosen to get a better view of 'appropriating' and the use one makes of such appropriation. Photographs of southern households cast in nostalgia underline the participation of segregated black folks in the aesthetics of the visual and creating galleries in their personal spaces when denied representation in art galleries.

While making a case for a few selected writers, the thesis does not claim situating modernities in specific thinkers and dismissing the rest. Instead, the thesis focuses on the unique transformations in and of modernity through the intervention of African American culture and vice versa. Just as modernity is not a universal phenomenon and is marked by distinctive passages in cultures and groups, visibility is also identified and appropriated in different ways. While the thesis does not privilege 'seeing' over any other mode of engagement, it definitely forms and visits several connecting links to show how discourses, say, of modernity, tend to change over time. Theorizing the act of 'seeing' and 'being seen' to participating in visual 'projects' like photography, documentation and even visual criticism, African American intellectual discourse establishes distinctive templates of modernity in this thesis through visual experiments.