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Lena Hill, *Visusalizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*

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Lena Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*, New York, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, 2014, 250 pages, ISBN 978-1-107-04158-5, 82 \$/75 €

- 1 In her ambitious rereading of important segments of the African American literary canon of works published between the eighteenth century and the beginning of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s, Lena Hill proposes to apply a methodology announced very clearly in the “Acknowledgments” to her work: “This book ponders visual images inspired by texts [...]”(xiii). In a critical gesture that signifies on the well-known “trope of the Talking Book” she proposes the notion of the trope of the Picture Book to explain the way in which African American writers have from the very beginning associated the capacity for intelligent readings of American racial experience with the act of seeing. Her approach is on the one hand a way of taking into account the highly visual dimension of race and the reliance throughout history on visual imagery to reduce the black man to a caricatured stereotype. It implies, in other words, that the black writer’s answer to such reductive imagery is to attempt to teach others to see, hence her emphasis on the relation between seeing and instruction, one of the strong points of her argumentation. On the other hand, it constitutes an attempt to counter the emphasis on voice and sound which has dominated critical discussions of African American literature for many years. This is a bold project, for voice and orality have their roots in theoretical models and anthropological approaches that have been fundamental in revealing the vitality of African American culture. The reader familiar with the authors she invokes, like W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington,

Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison, will therefore be looking for new insights into a well-covered terrain. Another important distinction she establishes from the start is the place of visual culture in her analysis, for although she takes her subjects' relation to visual media into account, her emphasis is on the act of visualizing, rather than on the objects which may eventually enter into the field of their vision.

- 2 Chapter one, entitled "Witnessing Moral Authority in Pre-Abolition Literature," addresses the role of the founding figures of African American literature, beginning with the poet Phillis Wheatley. Hill analyzes the way in which Wheatley establishes her own capacity to see intelligently in her relation to great art as a response to Alexander Pope's use of ekphrasis, directing readers' attention away from the contemplation of great art to the perception of a "morally upstanding, discerning African American speaker" (26). She also studies the well-known engraving representing the poet at her desk in its relation to other visual representations of blacks at the time, emphasizing the way it diverges from models that leave the black subject no object of contemplation but the white master. She extends this analysis to Frederick Douglass through a comparison of a well-known daguerreotype with a later portrait that presented a less-aggressive picture of the abolitionist, inciting his anger. She focuses on the scene in which Douglass describes his witnessing of the beating of his Aunt Hester to show how Douglass in his narrative attempted to align the reader's vision with his own. Chapter Two, "Picturing Education and Labor in Washington and Du Bois," looks at the relation of W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington to visual culture, arguing that the photographic collections Dubois showed at the 1900 Paris Exhibition presented a more conservative bourgeois black population than the black folk represented in *The Souls of Black Folk*, who possess what she calls a "black interior vision" (66). In one of the most original sections of the book, Hill examines the photographs of Tuskegee Institute taken by Frances Benjamin Johnston as a key to understanding the "interior spaces" of Tuskegee on account of the way they reveal the role of European art found on the walls of the classrooms and provide clues to the way in which Washington prepared his students to see the world in sophisticated ways, a reading which supplements without contradicting the image that Washington projected of an industrial education. Chapter Three, entitled "Gazing upon Plastic Art in the Harlem Renaissance," addresses the way black women writers "invert[ed] the expected power dynamic of the gaze" (82) by imagining women as artists capable of creating images of the black woman outside of the restrictive alternatives of "pristine Madonna" or "sexually unfettered primitive" (101) epitomized by Alain Locke's inclusion of Winold Reiss's *The Brown Madonna* in his collection *The New Negro*. Hill's analysis of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* relies on an interesting contrast with Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein; the mask serving to deconstruct Stein's face becomes a passively accepted mask of stereotype for Larsen's unassertive protagonist. Fauset's Angela in *Plum Bun*, on the contrary, proves capable of achieving "revised notions of black beauty" (116) and using them "in cultivating her political activism," thus enabling her to elaborate "an artistic philosophy that empowers the broader black community" (116).
- 3 Part Two, *Lessons from the Museum*, solicits the museum as a metaphor for the forces that allow writers to educate the vision of their readers. Hill uses the development of museums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to show how a writer like Zora Neale Hurston, who studied anthropology with Franz Boas, relied on the type of seeing and observation used in anthropology to construct a fictional world based on

“rigorous looking” (120). In so doing, she analyzes Boas’s insistence on the need for contextualization of objects in museums and links it to a similar concern in Hurston’s writing, which reveals, according to Hill, a desire “to picture an intellectual spectrum in rural black communities” (127), allowing them to be seen as complex contexts. Hill considers the major novels, in particular *Their Eyes were Watching God*, as what she calls “exhibition books” (132) on account of the way they attempt to “self-consciously exhibit the folk mind.” Starting from an emphasis on the “sites of observation” represented by the “front porch” and the “gate-post”, Hill shows how Hurston allows her characters “to perform the work of the cultural anthropologist” (132). Chapter Five, “Melvin Tolson : Gaining Modernist Perspective in the Art Gallery,” extends the museum metaphor to the art gallery, using the distinction between two visions of the African American museum, as temple or forum, as a way of analyzing Tolson’s desire to reconcile the need for high artistic standards with the desire to see black art as a vector for the affirmation of a complex black identity. In his collection of poems *Harlem Gallery*, he uses the character of the Curator to explore the difficulty of promoting sophisticated forms of modernist art for a public unwilling or unable to perceive it properly. Calling upon classical works from the past, the Curator uses them as stepping stones toward an understanding of what constitutes the essence of perspective-changing works, before presenting in later sections of his long poem the experiences of black artists confronted with the difficulty of reconciling artistic achievement with racial goals. Tolson, a relatively unknown poet who sought to promote a genuinely modernist black aesthetic, is seen as another visionary bent on educating the African American eye and making it capable of overcoming the “double consciousness” bind. The final chapter is devoted to Ralph Ellison. Here Hill uses Malraux’s idea of a museum without walls to trace the way in which Ellison’s *Invisible Man* learns to see beyond the exhibitions of power with which he is confronted early in the novel in order to arrive at a greater “visual maturity” (201). Hill, who has co-authored a reference guide to *Invisible Man*, relies heavily on her reading of the manuscript versions of the novel to show how Ellison weeded out references to modern art in order to focus on the difficulty his hero experienced in learning to decode the visual signs of black culture in order to arrive at a better understanding of the complexity of the African American identity. She pursues her analysis with a reading of Ellison’s unfinished novel *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, showing how the jazzman-turned-preacher Hickman is “more than willing to deploy his power of perception in multiple museum inflected spaces” (206), thus revealing a more sophisticated capacity for visual interpretation than his more well-known literary predecessor.

- 4 One is tempted to conclude that Lena Hill was inspired to carry out this study by the work she did with Ellison’s manuscripts, for Ellison was interested in both music and the plastic arts and was highly influential in relating artistic complexity to the development of African American fiction. The chapter on Ellison provides useful insight into the way in which Ellison resolved the potential contradiction between his interest in artistic complexity and his desire to present an authentic picture of black culture. There are many interesting moments in this book, for instance the discussion of the photographs of Tuskegee Institute that reveal the complexity of Booker T. Washington’s approach to education. However the argumentation occasionally appears forced, and the number of complex sentences used to relate each author to the general trope of the Picture book attests to the difficulty of keeping the reader’s attention focused on a message which does not always flow naturally from the examples evoked.

Her discussion of Zora Neale Hurston is a case in point. Hill's contention that "her novels focus on the visualizing practices of her protagonists" (147) seems difficult to accept uncritically for those who remember Phoeby's "hungry listening" (Hurston, 1937, 23). While interesting, the chapter on Hurston does not quite reach its mark. The book is carefully researched and documented, with extensive use of archival sources and a useful exploration of writers like the poet Melvin Tolson who are not often included in the canon of African American literature. However, a careful reading of the book and a perusal of the bibliography leave one perplexed by the absence of reference to scholars from outside the United States, even for theoretical purposes. Malraux is evoked because he was read by Ellison. Isn't this a clue to the breadth and depth of Ellison's vision? Richard Wright, who could also usefully be related to visualization, and who spent much of his life in France, is not included. This is a highly intelligent and thought-provoking book, with a laudable point of view anchored outside the current interest in voice and orality, but it could have profited from taking into account the vibrant interest in African American literature by scholars from other parts of the world, whom the computer age has brought into an international conversation with American critics.

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