

Diagramming the Colonial Imagination: Black Subjectivity, Capitalism, and Modernity

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Lindon Barrett. *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*. University of Illinois Press, 2014. 264 pp.

Lindon Barrett (1961-2008) was a Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of California, Irvine from 1990 to 2007 before moving to the University of California, Riverside. He was a distinguished scholar and the author of *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (2009), published by Cambridge University Press. *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (2014) is unfinished, published after Barrett's tragic death, and edited by Justin A. Joyce, Dwight A. McBride and John Carlos Rowe. The book is comprised of an introduction written by John Carlos Rowe, five chapters, and an epilogue by Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride. Both the introduction and epilogue provide editorial interventions and a substantive roadmap to the monograph. The editorial team makes clear that Barrett's unfinished manuscript consisted of four chapters, and that aside from missing an introduction and conclusion it is probable that two more chapters would have been added to the finished work. The fifth and final chapter of the book is an essay Barrett had prepared for another publication.

Notwithstanding the opaque prose and sometimes fragmented historical trajectory of Barrett's analysis, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* offers an inimitable contribution into how the conceptual treatment of "racial blackness" – as considered through its reified cultural, economic, literary, philosophical, and political registers – shaped the relationship between Euro-American colonialism, capitalism, and modernity. *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* can be divided into two parts, the first of which undertakes a genealogical analysis of infra-human subjectivity in the Atlantic plantation paradigm to explore how the polysemic discourses of "racial blackness," gleaned in the epistemic machinations of colonialism, capitalism, and modernity, consolidate sovereign power for the slavocracy and ultimately groom the emergence of modernity's white supremacist nation-state *par excellence* (The United States); and the second, which considers how the discursive morphology and material technologies of "racial blackness" that helped shape the

capitalistic market economy, negotiate an isomorphic dynamic between the colonial imperium and the rise of Western modernity through the autobiographical slave narrative.

Barrett demonstrates how “racial blackness” is not just a Manichaeian hypostasis of the colonial imagination to typologize an infrahuman subject and justify a diffuse spectacle of sovereign and disciplinary violence through manoeuvrings of acquisition, displacement, genocide, and coercive labour exploitation, but an aporia that effectively ruptures the epistemological fluency of race. Barrett locates the “discontinuity” of “racial blackness” in the legislative apparatus of the United States by revealing how the constitutional entrenchment of slave-labour, fugitive slave laws, and general economic and political disenfranchisement of the racialized black subject effectively belies the *fata morgana* of liberty, equality, and fraternity espoused in the “American civic.” In this respect, Barrett’s conceptualization of “racial blackness” functions as a grid of colonial intelligibility through its capacity to commission not only an ontological erasure, but the animation of a racialized *being* that is transposed to capture, commoditization, and subjugation. Barrett also illustrates how unreachable and hollow intercessions of bourgeois morality, civilization, and propriety are served up by the modern political state.

The first chapter of Barrett’s monograph, “The Conceptual Impossibility of Racial Blackness: History, the Commodity, and Diasporic Modernity,” carries out an examination of “racial blackness” in the Atlantic slave trade and Euro-American planocracy between the sixteenth and nineteenth-centuries. Barrett’s shibboleth for the market economy, the “ideally infinite arena of ideally infinite exchange,” is an epistemological abstraction that has waxed the abstract ideological logic of the capitalist economy – acquisition, exchange, and utility – into the governmental fabric of the modern political community. Chronologies of colonial conquest, displacement, genocide, and labour exploitation are explored throughout the chapter to provide context to the social, legal, and political management of race in the United States. For Barrett, the growth of the geopolitical capitalist economy born from the Atlantic arena reconfigures the nature of sovereign power from an interest of monarchical government to one where the disciplinary rationality of the “modern civic” comes to express itself through procedures of state racism. This chapter offers a robust historical analysis of slavery, capitalism, and modernity, vis-à-vis Alexander Butchart, Richard Dunn, David Elits, Paul Lovejoy, Achille Mbembe, Sidney Mintz, Ann Laura Stoler, among others.

The second chapter, “Making the Flesh Word: Binomial Being and Representational Presence,” examines how the concept of “binomial being” in the 1789 autobiographical slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas*

Vassa, the African, betrays Western modernity's presentation of a transparent, essentialist, and unitary black subject. Barrett's nuanced reading of the autobiographical slave narrative reveals how the bifurcated subjectivity of Equiano/Vassa obfuscates the naked violence of modernity. The "binomial" structure ultimately problematizes the ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological coordinates of racial identity for the "modern civil subject."

Chapter three, "Captivity, Desire, Trade: The Forging of National Form," turns to a more protracted analysis into how the antebellum fugitive slave narrative stations "racial blackness" as an organizing principle of white supremacist American state-craft through homologies of political disenfranchisement, juridical exclusion, economic marginality, and physical violence. Barrett refers to the Fugitive Slave Acts (1793 and 1850) and to landmark court decisions like *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842), *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), and *Ableman v. Booth* (1859), as well as to larger macro-political events such as the Northwest Ordinance (1787), the Missouri Compromise (1820), and the Kansas Nebraska Act (1854) to illustrate how contestations of juridico-political power shaped the racial personality of the United States.

"The Intimate Civic," which is the final chapter of Barrett's original manuscript, considers how the ex-slave narrator navigates the heteromorphic experience of his or her autobiographical testimony. The ex-slave narrator's identity is problematized by a compelling declaration of *sui iuris*, which projects an anti-colonial *logos* of agency, freedom, and *being*, while at the same time having to succumb to the violent subjugation under the modern state, in Giorgio Agamben's terms, as *homo sacer*, by repeating the details of their psychic and somatic trauma. "Racial blackness" as the *raison d'état* of civic modernity in the United States, which includes practices of xenophobia, dehumanization, and repression, demands the sacrifice of the ex-slave narrator's body to the West's normative raciological grammar. The racialized body is then recovered as an "artifact" for liberation.

Along with a continued analysis of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, the third and fourth chapters of Barrett's monograph navigate a diverse catalogue of autobiographical slave narratives, which include the following: David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America* (1829); Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831); Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); William Grimes's *Narrative of the Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* (1855); and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

The supplemental and concluding chapter, “Modernism and the Affects of Racial Blackness,” surveys the Harlem Renaissance through George Schuyler’s “The Negro-Art-Hokum” (1926) and Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain” (1926). Barrett considers how these two works undertake a critical response to the normative conventions of Western modernity, and its concomitant currencies of culture, technology, art, aesthetics, and consumerism, to carve out spaces of African American identity and knowledge.

The greatest achievement of Barrett’s monograph is his genealogical approach to identifying the relationship between racial subjectivity, capitalism, and Western modernity through the autobiographical slave narrative. While Barrett identifies how “racial blackness” operates as an “epistemic discontinuity” within the cartography of the mercantile/capitalist Atlantic economy and Western modernity, the diachronic and conceptual dimensions of infrahuman subjectivity are given a limited treatment. A more exhaustive historical consideration of how Eurocentric discourses of religious, cultural, and scientific racism equated blackness with primitiveness, contamination, and expendability would have broadened the genealogical arc of “racial blackness.” This could have been achieved by interrogating how *dispositifs* of racial subjectivity, such as the Curse of Ham, the Spanish obsession with pure blood, and climatic theories that identified black peoples as suited for plantation labour, for example, spawned diverse systems of hierarchical classification. This complex etymological archive of “racial blackness,” as a discursive and material field of the colonial imagination could then explore how contestations of creolisation, syncretism, and hybridity further inscribe the racialized body.

While Barrett identifies how the necropolitical economic rationalization of the slaveocracy to capture, incarcerate, transport, commoditize, and ultimately exploit enslaved African peoples throughout the Caribbean and United States was a function of sovereign and disciplinary power, he overlooks how practices of colonial governmentality also realized an “epistemic discontinuity” within Western modernity. The “discontinuity” of “racial blackness” is located not just in the macropolitical disciplinary procedures of American constitutionalism (surveillance, containment, and punishment) that negate liberalism’s appeal for liberty, equality, and fraternity, but in the microphysical permutations of governmental plantation management in the nineteenth-century (desire, incentive, and security) that offer the enslaved access to marriage, medical care, increased provisions, financial rewards, and intermittent relief from the hardships of field labour to encourage childbirth on the plantation. Colonial governmentality in this milieu of amelioration transitions the juridico-institutional and ethico-political scope of “racial blackness” under slavery to a more polyvalent managerial bulwark that can reinforce protocols of capitalist exploitation

after emancipation.

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