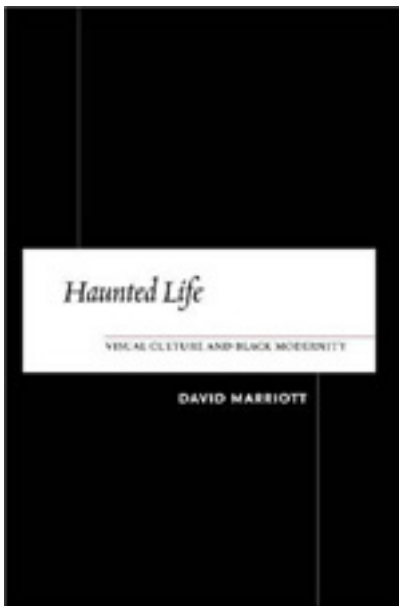


***Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* by David Marriott**

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David Marriott's *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* examines the multilayered connection between the racialized structure of western society and the visual nature of black modern culture. Analyzing some of the founding tropes of what could be defined as black culture, *Haunted Life* deconstructs the way visual culture has played a key role in the production of an alternative notion of modernity, specifically black modernity—a particular understanding of modern subjectivity among people of African descent. Through examples from film, television, and modernist literature, Marriott constructs a compelling argument probing the ways that media technologies are haunted by the phantom of racial slavery. Marriott's main argument is that ideological image of a brutal African past of slavery has been endlessly recycled, perpetuating the racial logic of culture. Written with a broadly cultural studies perspective, the author proposes the intellectual exercise of deconstructing what he defines as the race-conscious paranoia of western nation-states: a task that from its very definition constitutes a critical reading of the way intellectuals and mass media have criminalized race in the everyday construction of the public sphere.

The volume opens with the story of the deaths of two Nigerian boys in London. Marriott uses these deaths and the way the British mass media portray their stories as a metaphor for the main argument of the book, symbolizing the violence that has accompanied the history of blacks since the forced diasporas of the slave trade. His approach could be defined as

Afro-pessimism, a particular understanding of black history that theorizes the workings of civil society as contiguous with slavery and with a brutal African past linked to bondage. As author Frank B. Wilderson, III states, Afro-pessimists such as Saidiya Hartman or Hortense Spillers argue that “there is no place for the black, only prosthetics, techniques which give the illusion of a relationality in the world.”¹ According to Afro-pessimists, the solution for this perennial condition would come only through a process of rewriting the tacit racial social contract in which we operate. Otherwise, we are subjects to the trauma of seeing an African past that keeps on happening, keeps on haunting.

The seven chapters that follow reflect on the relation between spectrality and the visible, on “the occult presence of racial slavery, nowhere but nevertheless everywhere” (xxi). Marriott is concerned with exploring the anguishing visual constitution of black modernity. Profoundly influenced by the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre and the postmodern work of intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Franz Fanon, the author manages to craft a narrative that comparatively historicizes the way slavery and its violent images have molded the Black Atlantic imaginary. Marriott is at his best when he delineates the relation between the legacies of black visual culture and the political sexual violence that lies buried beneath it. Drawing on a range of works by scholars and thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Richard Wright, Isaac Julien, Alain Locke, and Sidney Poitier, Marriott argues in favor of rethinking the way historians have worked with images (and spectrality) as representations of power. This volume’s unique contribution to the fields of sociology and cultural studies lies in the construction of an epistemology for the study of the psychological aspects of race and racism at the level of visual culture. As Marriott seeks to demonstrate, racial violence infiltrates the unconscious of both the black and the white person, molding two ontologically irreconcilable positions.

Some of the weaknesses of this volume lie in its incapacity to offer a decentralized definition of black modernity. Marriott tends to adopt a North-Atlantic-centered position that excludes, for example, the vast scholarship written on the lingering persistence of slave mentalities in Afro-Brazilian communities since the mid-20th century. Second, the ontological racial dichotomy proposed in this volume reproduces previous attempts to generalize and normalize racial relations according to the model of British or American racial dynamics. In the same vein as Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, Marriott defines racial problems and categories through the lens of western academic imperialism, perpetuating the North-South dichotomy. Third, the Afro-pessimist approach resembles other attempts to construct knowledge using history as a legitimating tool with which to respond to contemporary politics; for example, in the past, Afro-centrism has triggered harsh criticism for neglecting a real historical review of Western culture that would aim to document and reassess the contributions that black people have made to world civilization. Through this logic, Afro-pessimists could be accused of perpetuating the myth of African victimhood as it emerged in Western political thought at the same moment that Africa achieved political liberation.

Haunted Life posits a challenge for any reviewer, but especially for a reviewer trained in the eschatological craft of historicizing the written word. Although it would be fair to state that the vast majority of historians continue to favor the use of written documents as the central source to construct explanatory narratives of the past, historians have recently incorporated some of the analytical tools and methodologies offered by postmodern critics. Marriott responds to this new trend in history: acknowledging the artificial compartments that separate social sciences and humanities, he deftly navigates the waters of history, philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies to map the ideas that have shaped black visual culture in history. In doing so, he has produced an important piece of scholarship that can be read by members of any of the above-mentioned disciplines, and especially by graduate students interested in the study of race. This volume is not only about perennial mourning of an Afro-pessimist version of black history and of conjuring a haunted life, but it is also about the centrality of visual culture in the construction and reproduction of modernity.

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Notes

¹ Interview published in Frank B. Wilderson, III's personal webpage: <http://www.incognegro.org/>