

## REVIEWS

### **DISCERNING RACIAL IDENTITY AND VIOLENT CONSEQUENCES: ANOTHER LOOK AT FAULKNER AND WRIGHT**

Linda Chavers, *Violent Disruptions: American Imaginations of Racial Anxiety in William Faulkner and Richard Wright*. New York: Peter Lang, 2019. 111+xxi pp. ISBN: 978-1-4331-4218-5.

This study by Linda Chavers is a slightly revised and, in a bewildering way, updated version of her Ph.D. dissertation (defended in 2013) of a shorter title, *Violent Disruptions: Richard Wright and William Faulkner's Racial Imaginations*, which she wrote for a Department of African and African American Studies. Her dissertation is available online. The introductory "Prologue" is followed by the first chapter of the dissertation which analyzes *Absalom, Absalom!* However, the original literary analysis from the dissertation overall is otherwise padded with numerous references to the controversial political campaign and surprising presidential election in 2016, emphasizing racial overtones in Donald Trump's political rhetoric, as well as contemporary events pertaining to race published in newspapers or in on-line social media such as "The Hunger Games" or a horror movie entitled *Get Out* (2017). The chapters which follow attempt to interpret Wright's *Native Son* (Chapter Two), "Big Boy Leaves Home," a short story first published in 1936 (Chapter Three) and the final chapter focusing on Faulkner's *Light in August* followed by a seven page conclusion, all augmented with events or issues related to race and often published on social media.

Mixed in with the author's analysis of the responses by fictional Mississippi whites (in particular Sutpen and Compson clan members) to racial questions regarding Faulkner's racially ambiguous characters Joe Christmas, Charles Bon and arguably, Thomas Sutpen, along with Wright's racially unambiguous Big Boy or the racism exhibited by the prosecutor and Chicago media regarding Wright's *Bigger Thomas*, Linda Chavers published a monograph offering no new literary analysis though "Racial Anxiety" has been added into the new subtitle of this "revised dissertation."

To go back to the "Prologue" (retitled from her dissertation's "Prelude"), Chavers begins with the following words:

The other night, I read an op-ed titled "Black with (Some) White Privilege." Of course, once done with the article the very next thing I did

was to go onto Twitter and post a link to the article with the caption: “Let me tell y’all what you’re not going to do.”

(ix)

This opening was not included in her Harvard dissertation. The next, second, paragraph in the monograph is actually the first one in the dissertation, exemplifying the pattern of paragraph added here and there devoid of literary analysis that constitutes the only revision of the 2013 dissertation while, unfortunately, some orthographical and grammatical errors are repeated in the 2019 monograph.

Later in the “Prologue,” Chavers writes that “[t]hroughout this inquiry” she relies on “the solid foundations set by Jacques Lacan and Frederic Jameson, and from polemics by Eric Lott, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, and Mikko Tuhkanen, among others” (xvii). However, nothing of Jameson or the cultural historian Lott is evident in the monograph. They are never once cited or their work applied in any chapter. Omi and Winant are sociologists, and their *Racial Formation in the United States* does not refer to Faulkner at all and only fleetingly to Wright’s 1954 nonfiction travel book to Africa’s Gold Coast, but the non-Lacanian approach in *Racial Formation* is referred to occasionally. Lacanian interpretation is applied well to Wright’s fiction thanks to the extensive (if not overly liberal) use of Mikko Tuhkanen’s *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory and Richard Wright* (2009). There is little Lacanian research undertaken in either of Faulkner’s two novels (some quotes are taken from the “Lacan” section covered by Vincent Leitch and cited from *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), but Lacan’s approach comes exclusively from the five pages of “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” Chavers appends *et passim* racial anxiety through new polemical, nonliterary texts. The reader of this monograph thus wanders through a tremendous mixture of secondary literature pertaining to Faulkner and Wright, but also many unrelated issues from politicians, actresses and current events occurring in the years 2016-18 pertaining to racism or violent racial oppression.

To cite one example, the successful movie actress Zoe Saldana is referred to in Chapter Four which should focus on *Light in August*. Chavers takes great issue with Saldana’s response in a 2012 interview published in *Allure* magazine:

When asked about her racial background, the non-white actress Zoe Saldana said it made her uncomfortable to discuss race because she was not raised to see color: “I find it uncomfortable to have to speak about my

identity all the time, when in reality it's not something that drives me or wakes me up out of bed every day. I didn't grow up in a household *where I was categorized by my mother.*"

(81, emphasis added)

Chavers quotes and emphasizes only this small portion of the long interview and sets it up for criticism to be repeatedly addressed: "There are many obviously troubling notions in Saldana's words, but what's most pertinent for my ever-growing obsession is how her words resonate with [...] legislation [which] holds that the slave status of a child followed that of the mother" (81).

The polemical attack by Chavers against this Dominican/Puerto Rican actress Zoe Saldana who was raised in the Dominican Republic is a replication of numerous forms of criticism directed against the actress because she played the role of the political activist singer Nine Simone in a film while showing less public interest in racial politics herself. In another interview with the same publication named *Allure*, replying to the heavy criticism in social media, Zoe Saldana responded with some hostility (not included in Chavers's study):

"There's no one way to be black," she says quietly and slowly, clearly choosing her words carefully. "I'm black the way I know how to be. You have no idea who I am. I am black. I'm raising black men. Don't you ever think you can look at me and address me with such disdain."

Chavers's selective quotation and subsequent argument is a bouleversement, a straw man in this chapter purportedly dedicated to *Light in August*. Linda Chavers cites an author reviewing Faulkner's general reception in Nazi Germany and suggests the importance of considering "fascist themes worth investigating" in Faulkner's *Light in August* (80) but then does not do so. She then refers briefly to research by Lacan scholar Tuhkanen as well as more sociology. Then she avers, "Given that Faulkner was a white man, we have to acknowledge that his work cannot fit into any canon of marginalized voices. In other words, he did not produce out of any restricted social spaces" (82). Chavers's literary criticism has all the earmarks of what the late Harold Bloom called the "School of Resentment" a quarter of a century ago. Imbedded in all this foolishness, however, is a serious side which has nothing to do with the culture wars, and this is her strategy of investigation and interpretation.

After Chavers quotes Omi and Winant regarding racial formation, she writes: "The authors put in sociological terms what Faulkner expressed in his fiction beginning with her interracial character Joe Christmas" (83). With no further elaboration, Chavers immediately quotes Hortense Spillers' alleged

psychoanalytical approach to an entirely dissimilar author, an eighteenth-century white abolitionist named William Goodall and his account of an enslaved black woman. The next paragraph reveals that “it is not as easy to detect the concerns and motives in the *Light of August*” which “contains the plot within its frame narrative therefore further confuses any reading the searches for the story’s preoccupations” (83). (I am not sure where to put “(sic)” but I have cited her wording faithfully.) Then she vexingly returns to readdress the same words of the Dominican actress Zoe Saldana. In Chapter Four Chavers should analyze *Light in August* and apply Lacan’s psychoanalytical methods, but she finds the novel too puzzling and accordingly reverts back to sociological methods when racial identity is misnamed or misidentified (as Joe Christmas). Suffice it to say that the author has arrived at no new results, but has spent much effort jousting against straw men and running through open doors.

I will end this Jeremiad by suggesting that Chavers’s ‘method’ could be what Harold Bloom meant in his 1994 book *The Western Canon* about “cultural studies” departments investigating texts while employing dubious methods, in this case a department of African American Studies rather than an English department for a dissertation on Faulkner/Wright. This monograph may serve to remind us of the need to press for greater precision and focus on attending to literary texts rather than making analogical arguments with arbitrarily chosen contemporary events such as a February 2018 quote from a *Twitter* account regarding the racial divide and Russia’s election interference, another on-line piece on the “Hunger Games” (this time from *gawker.com*) as well as the killing of teenager Trayvon Martin by George Zimmermann in Florida, all placed *pari passu* in a “Conclusion” to an analysis of Faulkner/Wright. Mixing popular polemics with literary analysis while placing them on equal footing must be contested, for this is just a hunt for real-time parallels without meaningful literary scrutiny. Such comparisons are poor on the face of it.

I had chosen to review this monograph because its title suggested a stimulating analysis of two major American fiction writers who addressed race and identity and included shocking violence of mob rule in rich polyphony to express, among other issues, human frailty. Particularly in Faulkner’s novels, these issues seem only to have perplexed the author while her analysis on Wright’s fiction seems overly dependent on the aforementioned *The American Optic* by Mikko Tuhkanen. Regarding value and price, *Violent Disruptions* is a rather slim volume (111 pages + xxi) given its hefty price of 75 euros.

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