

Mikko Tuhkanen. *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright.* Albany: SUNY P, 2009. 255 pp. \$24.95.

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Mikko Tuhkanen's *The American Optic* is an impressive act of critical diplomacy. As the title of his introduction—"Richard, Jacques; Jacques, Richard"—suggests, Tuhkanen's work seeks to acquaint two writers (Wright and Lacan) and two discourses (African American literature and psychoanalysis) not traditionally understood to be on speaking terms. Indeed, as Claudia Tate observed in a pioneering synthesis, black literary-intellectual discussion has historically been marked by a "general absence of psychoanalytic models," the reasons for which are both manifold and formidable. Tuhkanen, while keenly aware of the many hazards attending any attempt to facilitate a rapprochement, nonetheless argues for the benefit of psychoanalysis in reinvigorating our appreciation of Wright's work and in "rethinking race as a visible category" (xi). Drawing on the insights of the so-called New Lacanians and walking some of the same ground covered most recently by Abdul JanMohamed, Tuhkanen proposes that a specifically Lacanian point of view may help us to more thoroughly distinguish the contours of what he calls the "white symbolic order" and to more readily perceive the ways that African American literature, especially Wright's work, articulates the limitations and possibilities of the black subject's resistance. His book is thus a welcome and largely successful bid to forge détente between two discourses that, after all, have quite a bit to offer one another.

Reciprocity is, in fact, one of Tuhkanen's signal commitments, and he is particularly careful to avoid reproducing a paradigm whereby "psychoanalytic knowledge appears as an uncontested master interpreting its [literary] objects" (xviii). Pledging a qualified allegiance to Shoshana Felman and Francoise Meltzer, Tuhkanen recognizes with them the need for an authentic dialogue between the literary and theoretical which imagines both realms as similarly and eminently readable. He is as interested in applying the theoretical insights of psychoanalysis to literature as he is in applying the tools of literary criticism to the discourse of psychoanalysis; throughout his study, he moves with agility between the two.

He also remains sensitive to charges that psychoanalysis is "impervious to the urgency of political questions or directly racist in its basic assumptions" (xiii). Effectively parrying some of most pointed attacks, Tuhkanen argues that a more nuanced and frankly more accurate understanding of Lacanian theory obviates many of the most egregious complaints leveled against psychoanalysis. Still, in his engagement with postcolonialism in chapter three, he more often deflects than defeats the arguments of critics like Ati Seyki-Out and Nigel Gibson who question psychoanalysis's ability to address historical and material realities. In any case, Tuhkanen argues forcefully for the singular advantages of a specifically Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, suggesting that it may ultimately provide a supple and politically viable framework for approaching questions of racialization and black subject formation in U. S. culture.

Tuhkanen largely delivers on the promises of his introduction in an opening chapter which theorizes what he calls the *white* symbolic order—a move made possible only by imagining that the Lacanian symbolic is not, *pace* Judith Butler and others, immutable, but instead characterized by a kind of variability and historical specificity (141). This is a provocative and profoundly useful reconsideration of the nature of the symbolic and it makes plausible the dialogue between psychoanalysis and critical race theory that forms the titular enterprise of the study. Tuhkanen initially theorizes

the white symbolic by way of Wright's *Native Son* and Lacan's *Seminar XI*. What most interests him in this connection is the consistent interest in Wright's work with ways of seeing and being seen, and the possibility of linking this to Lacan's theory of the visible. He identifies a particularly rich example in Bigger's initial encounter with Mr. Dalton, where the eminent Chicago businessman stands "gazing at [Bigger] with an amused smile that made him conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body" (5). As Tuhkanen smartly concludes, "the white gaze does not merely assign Bigger a skin color but simultaneously determines something beyond the epidermal surface: it racializes the subject. . ." (5). Being looked at, in other words—being subject to the white gaze—fixes Bigger within a regime of visibility and assigns him a place in the white symbolic order, a structure predicated on the supremacy of racial difference. Tuhkanen calls this location "The [B]igger's Place"—a "thoroughly fixed and determined" position proceeding from enforced visibility (8). He provocatively contrasts this location with the "nigger's place," a more familiar but, for Tuhkanen, less effective means of racialization which depends upon the threat of violence to keep African Americans in their "place."

Throughout *The American Optic*, Tuhkanen returns to this dialectic of place to delineate an early-twentieth-century shift in U. S. culture from mechanisms of overt violence that sustain the white symbolic order to reliance on the covert violence of enforced racial visibility. In his fourth chapter, for example, Tuhkanen charts this Foucauldian turn from punishment to discipline by reading Wright's *Black Boy* in the context of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. In both texts, Tuhkanen is particularly interested in scenes of surveillance, and he fruitfully contrasts instances of slaves being watched in Douglass's narrative to scenes in Wright's autobiography where the narrator learns to "watch himself." This internalization of surveillance—a form of "self-breaking" rather than slave-breaking—characterizes what Tuhkanen dubs the "optical trade," a phrase borrowed from Wright that names "both an economy of the visible and a historical shift toward disembodied surveillance" (108). What we witness here, however, is no mere substitution of one model of control for another. Rather, Tuhkanen, in a gesture that maps the historical narrative of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* onto the more specific history of U. S. race relations, concludes that the optical trade is an "apparatus of subjection whose function is arguably *more* uninterrupted and economical because it seeks to make the racialized subject . . . into his or her own slave-driver" (128; emphasis added).

While Tuhkanen carefully and convincingly illuminates how the white symbolic order works to suture its black subjects into place, he is even more attentive to the possibility and morphology of resistance. Drawing initially on Lacan's articulation and criticism of "geometral perspective" in *Seminar XI*, Tuhkanen suggests that white subjects, too, are characterized by a fixedness in which they imagine themselves as entirely distinct from, unaffected by, and knowledgeable about the objects they perceive. Thus immobilized in and by imaginary delusions, the white gaze is open to a manipulation that may allow figures like Bigger to drop out of vision and achieve a momentary release from the white symbolic order. Tuhkanen proceeds, chapter by chapter, to further examine the conditions of this release, interrogating them from several imaginative angles. Chapter two, for instance, sees Tuhkanen surveying the history of minstrel theory to propose a model of "Black(face) Magic," a term he coins to describe the double-edged potential of the masks donned by black performers to fool the audience and elude the white gaze (43). In a brilliant reading of Bigger's attempts at mimicry in *Native Son*, Tuhkanen shows us how the character's "black-face" performances allow him to "escape full, disempowering visibility" (48) while threatening to "recapture [him] by the very means by which he attempts to deceive" (52). Whatever agency Bigger (or any other performer) might achieve through mimicry is thus inevitably qualified, contingent, and uncontrollable.

It is precisely this unpredictability and lack of control that, for Tuhkanen, characterizes all forms of resistance within the white symbolic order, and it is on these grounds that many readers will have trouble with his conclusions. Whether he is examining how the “experience of the literary” enables the subject to negotiate disciplinary visibility or comparing the tactics of female Algerian terrorists to the tragic sacrifice of Aunt Sue in “Bright and Morning Star,” Tuhkanen consistently raises the specter of authentic agency only to bat it back down (and sometimes revive it once again).

I would insist, however, that this apparent ambivalence is not a symptom of Tuhkanen’s inability to make up his mind or a reluctance to commit to one theory of agency over another. Instead, I am reminded of Anne Anlin Cheng’s suggestion (articulated in her own study of race and psychoanalysis) that we make a “serious effort at rethinking ‘agency’” altogether (*Melancholy of Race* 15). The Lacanian psychoanalytic theory Tuhkanen employs helps him to do just that. As he explains in a long and complicated engagement with Fanon, a subject can enact *real* symbolic change, but the Lacanian theory of becoming holds that this change must remain incalculable (104). Speaking of Aunt Sue’s terroristic suicide, he insists that “[t]here are no easy politics of resistance to be drawn from this scene . . . [and t]he tragic aspect of . . . Aunt Sue’s suicidal act points to strictly unforeseeable shifts in the symbolic order” (105). To embrace a Lacanian understanding of change is thus to relinquish any specific goals or hopes we may harbor. We stand, instead, before a spinning wheel of fortune which we ourselves have set in motion, knowing only that change will occur, but unable to predict either its nature or its direction.

This “rethinking” of agency and the possibilities of change seems to me the signal contribution of a remarkably ambitious project whose wide reach will lead some readers, including this one, to quibble with its scope. Tuhkanen’s study is stunning in its sweep: in just under two hundred pages, it traverses an extraordinarily wide swath of literary and theoretical terrain, engaging along the way not only Lacan, but also Hegel, Fanon, and Foucault; not only Wright, but also Baldwin, Douglass, and Du Bois. The range is impressive but the effect can be dizzying, and, at times, one wonders if (to adopt the author’s own idiom) the magic hasn’t hexed the conjurer. For example, Tuhkanen frequently closes his chapters with digressive postscripts (e.g., the analysis of Warren Hutcherson’s comedy in chapter two and the sudden appearance of Darwin at the end of chapter four) that seem only loosely relevant. They mitigate the force of the preceding arguments and lead the chapters to end with a whimper rather than a bang.

Then again, in spite of all that Tuhkanen manages to include, there are certain omissions in his narrative for which it is hard to account. Perhaps the most significant lacuna in a study committed to the politics and parameters of racial visibility is a sustained engagement with Ralph Ellison and *Invisible Man*. Though Ellison’s writing on minstrelsy features prominently in Tuhkanen’s second chapter, his novel is mentioned only in passing—an elision all the more curious since Ellison and Wright were not just contemporaries but friends with a shared philosophical and material interest in psychoanalysis (their work together on Harlem’s LaFargue Clinic being just one example). Tuhkanen’s study is not necessarily hamstrung by Ellison’s relative invisibility, but the absence leaves one wondering, eagerly, what a critic of Tuhkanen’s analytical deftness might have done (or someday do) with Ellison’s work.