Review Essay

Iconography, Race, and Lore in the Atlantic World

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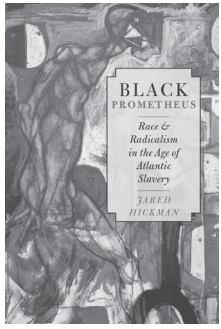

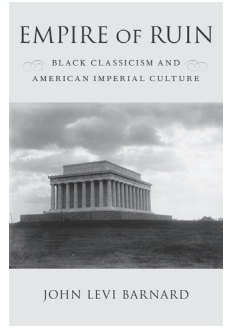

BLACK PROMETHEUS: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery. By Jared Hickman. New York: Oxford University Press. 2017.
EMPIRE OF RUIN: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture. By John Levi Barnard. New York: Oxford University Press. 2018.
BLACK AND BLUR. By Fred Moten. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2017.

On the afternoon of July 4, 2018, the images of a black woman sitting calmly (then lying and crouching) at the feet of the Statue of Liberty flooded social media timelines and broadcast news programs. A short time earlier, the woman at the center of the spectacle, activist Therese Patricia Okoumou, had parted ways with a group of direct-action demonstrators from Rise and Resist to scale the

0026-3079/2018/5802-031$2.50/0 American Studies, 58:2 (2019): 31–40

base of the statue. Collectively, the group of eight had decided to take a stance on Independence Day against President Donald Trump's recent "zero tolerance" immigration policies and the separation and detention of Mexican and Central American children. Of her own volition, Okoumou—who had immigrated from the Republic of Congo more than two decades ago—climbed before the demonstrators were confronted by police and tucked herself "in a copper crease of Lady Liberty's robes," (Killelea, "ABOLISH ICE: Woman Climbs Statue of Liberty to Protest Trump's Immigration Policies"). Her sole demonstration effectively shut down the national monument as authorities attempted to retrieve her.

Okoumou, who was arrested after a three-hour standoff with the NYPD, later told *The Guardian* that, in addition to thinking of and protesting for the children held in detention, she was imagining the symbolism of the very space she occupied: "I was thinking of Lady Liberty above me, you are so huge, you have always been a symbol of welcome to people arriving in America and right now, for me under this sandal, she is a shelter," (Joanna Walters, "Are They Going to Shoot Me?: Statue of Liberty Climber on Her Anti-Trump Protest"). What Therese Okoumou declares is, after all, what has come to represent the broader semiotic meaning of the Statue of Liberty. The robed, torch-bearing woman is the declared "Mother of Exiles." Historian Tyler Stovall writes that while Lady Liberty, a gift from France to the United States, is considered "the most famous immigrant in American history," there have been limits to the meaning and extent of her iconographic symbolism, especially as it regards American citizens and immigrants of color (Stovall 17). Stovall writes:

> The resplendent white lady standing above New York Harbor turned her back on the racialized working masses of Europe and the increasingly marginalized blacks and other people of color in America. When Americans celebrated the inauguration of the Statue of Liberty in 1886, they celebrated a racialized version of liberty […] Right from the beginning of its history, therefore, the Statue of Liberty was a powerful representation of white freedom. (13)

Representing what Stovall names "the whiteness of freedom" inherent in American liberty, the neoclassical design of the Statue of Liberty—modeled after the Roman goddess, Libertas—has long had limitations assigned implicitly (at the very least) to its meaning. However, what is interesting about Okoumou's choice to find "shelter" at the feet of this statue is that she too understands the limitations of the statue's iconography. This would explain why she and the other protestors decided to demonstrate on the monument on Independence Day in the first place. Yet, like many activists before her, she seems to have sought her meditation at the feet of the statue as a way to both reclaim that iconography for herself, as a black woman and a foreign-born naturalized citizen, while holding the nation accountable for its failure to reflect this iconography via libertarian values.

The visibility and the ongoing conversations steeped in the racialization of American iconography in the form of monuments, policies, art, and public spaces make the most recent texts by Jared Hickman, Fred Moten, and John Levi Barnard all the more compelling and timely. Each of the authors grapple with some iteration of the impact of black expression via literature, visual art, or performance on disruption of Eurocentric views of classicism and neo-classisicism. Hickman's *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* (2017) and Barnard's *Empire of Ruin: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture* (2018) take on this topic more directly, emphasizing specifically white American imperial co-optations of Ancient Greek and Roman (respectively) iconography and lore, while elaborating on the ways in which African-American authors, artists, and activists have taken those same symbols to point out the contradictions of American conceptions of freedom and liberty. Moten's *Black and Blur* (2017), however, takes a look inward—into "Afro-Atlantic" expressions of blackness—to blur conceptions of what is expressed by the artists, creators, and scholars at the center of his short essays as ways of being, knowing, and relating blackness to a modernity thrust upon them by the social, political, economic, and cultural ramifications of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Western Imperialism. At the heart of the subjects of each of these texts seems the same purpose that led Okoumou to the unchained feet of Lady Liberty: The idea that classical semiotics and hero-making is neither the sole possession of white America nor are these symbols a true reflection of liberty and civilization with the continued disenfranchisement of black Americans and other people of color in the United States.

Black Prometheus is a dense and thoroughly-researched entry into the use of classicist semiotics in the literature of the 18th and 19th centuries. Prometheus, the titan and architect of man who is punished by Zeus for gifting men fire, serves literature as a multifaceted character, at times sympathetic and heroic but, at others, cunning and undermining of the projects of the gods (particularly Zeus). At the crux of his evaluations of the symbolism of Prometheus in this literature, Hickman narrows his foci to two iterations of the titan that emerge—White Prometheus and Black Prometheus—whose existences ultimately negate one another:

> In so far as the triumph of the white Prometheus was based on the Euro-Christian's representation of the Absolute God to the non-Euro-Christian, the triumph of the white Prometheus took the form of a quest for the best of all possible defenses, the most comprehensive and nuanced justifications, of Euro-Christian imperialism.
>
> The triumph of black Prometheus, on the other hand, entailed a prophetic critique rather than a post facto rationalization of Euro-Christian hegemony. It represented a subjection to inquest and protest of the authority of the Euro-Christian God that modeled and licensed slaveholding. At the least, the

> triumph of the black Prometheus necessitated the opening of theodicy—making the Christian God's standing contingent on the demonstration of His will to revolutionize the cosmic status quo, to be genuinely universal, an undertaking that might be seen as the core of Afro-Atlantic Christianities and the orthodox anti slavery they spawned. […] The freedom of the first Prometheus, the white Prometheus, is an absolute freedom predicated on the subjugation of the second Prometheus, the black Prometheus; and the freedom of the second, black Prometheus variously contradicts the absolute freedom of the first, white Prometheus (Hickman 83).

Thereby, the interpretations of Prometheus or Promethean struggle ascribed to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley by the author present different symbols and purposes (promoting, as Emerson does, the white titan iconography as representative of the benevolence and Absolute power of Euro-Christian God and, by association, Euro-Christians) are different from those of African-American orators and writers like Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Banneker as well as interpretations (by black and white writers) of the life and sacrifice of the ill-fated insurrectionist Denmark Vessey (258). That both the tragic and heroic idea of Prometheus bound or Prometheus liberating would be of use to writers attempting to validate their causes for black or white American freedom (which, per Hickman, cannot exist concurrently, based on the ideals presented) makes a compelling read.

Black Prometheus is sectioned into four parts to guide the reader through Hickman's argument. In Part I, "Historical Conditions and Contexts of Black Prometheanism," he outlines the culmination of the broad perspectives of Prometheus via the advents of globalism and modernity within the commencement of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Euro-Christian colonial project. In the second section, "Prometheus of Africa," Hickman presents the counter-position of African-centered Promethean symbolism against the idea of the Absolute authority of Euro-Christian hegemony and carries this discussion further into what he calls a "metahistory of African Survivals," or ascribing traditional Promethean (or titan) symbolism to African origins of astronomy and cosmography via "fugitive science" (centering authors like Banneker and Martin Delany). Part III, "Prometheus of Caucasus," returns to Hickman's discussion of Euro-Christian (or Euro-Christian-centered) ethno euhemerization of Prometheus in Euro-Atlantic (or Western) idealism; for this white Prometheus—as exemplified by the texts of the Shelleys—the titan was emblematic of "liberation through the tacitly presumed or aggressively asserted historical triumph of white civilization over nonwhite peoples," (226). Finally, in Part IV, "A Literary History of Slave Rebellion," Hickman presents a literary history of slave rebellion in fiction, extrapolating upon the limitations of cosmography and mythology, or how insurrection and rebellion complicate these understandings, within novels by J. Hector St. John de

Crevecoeur, Frederick Douglass, Victor Hugo, Gertrudis Bomez de Avellaneda y Arteaga, and Herman Melville and concludes the study with a discussion of Lord Byron's influence on Promethean transatlantic abolitionist literature by William Wells Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Brazilian poet Castro Alves.

While an impressive and thought-provoking work of scholarship, *Black Prometheus* could have easily been two (or three) connected volumes of the influence of classicism and neo-classicism, by way of Prometheus, in the literature of the early New World. Hickman generously points the reader to discussions that might be of interest to them in his Introduction's section "How to Use This Book," pointing his readers to chapters 3 and 5 for the crux of his argument (25). However, for a work this impassioned, detailed, and complete, it is more than worth taking the entirety of his study all together. *Black Prometheus* is an infinitely resourceful literary study for those seeking to understand racialized iconography of Prometheus or the uses of cosmography (and metacosmography) in the discussions of liberation and freedom and how the possessor(s) of those symbols determines to whom its iconography might belong and, furthermore, how iconography is complicated by the very realities in which the creators and consumers live.

Similarly, John Levi Barnard's *Empire of Ruin* traces this iconography by way of "black classicism" from the founding of America through the present, considering its capacity to counteract the white capitalist American cooptation of the symbols of libertarianism, civilization, and moral authority as their own. In many cases throughout the study, Barnard presents the trope of the ancient Roman statesman Cato of Utica, who, like the mythological Prometheus, is regarded as both a sympathetic and heroic inspiration, having sacrificed his life rather than live under the rule of a tyrannical Julius Caesar, thereby martyring himself as a revolutionary emblem of Roman freedom, for both his counterparts and politicians, writers, artists, and audiences of the modern era (Barnard 27). The symbolism of Cato was especially true for the founders and early British colonists of America. White early Americans—anticipating the Revolutionary War and rejecting British rule—envisioned themselves Cato, their situation "Catonic." Furthermore, upon their freedom, the monuments and edifices of America reflected this fascination and reenvisioning of themselves (white Americans, especially the affluent and influential) as descendants—morally and historically—of a liberation-minded ancient Rome, by way of Cato's example. From the Revolutionary Era through the 21st century, Barnard traces this iconography but centers his discussion on the works of whom he and other scholars consider practioners of black classicism and their disruptions of the mythology of America as an heir of the libertarianism imagined of Ancient Rome. Expertly researched and efficiently written, *Empire of Ruin* brings the dynamic lyrics of Phillis Wheatley, the eviscerating critique of African-American abolitionist newspapers, the critical essays and fiction of William Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt, and Toni Morrison, and the contrapuntal sculpture of Kara Walker to the fore as examples of African-American creators tackling the hypocrisies of white imperial authority and libertarianism. These

black classicists, Barnard demonstrates, effectively hold a mirror to American ideals of liberty and justice and reveal a reflection askew.

Empire of Ruin is separated into five chapters, each presenting a new facet of this flawed reflection of American principles. In his introduction, Barnard writes that, despite the fact that the mission and the monuments of the United States have engaged the "triumphal style of Rome," black classicist writers and artists engage a "countertradition" that provides "an incisive and persistent critique of both the 'barbarism inherent to the mission and the ways this barbarism is obscured and elided in the aesthetic forms of public memory" (16). The first chapter, "Phillis Wheatley and the Affairs of State," centers the enslaved poet's challenge to the moral authority of white American politics as a direct interlocutor of early statesmen through her verse. Critics of Wheatley's verse directed at or eulogizing white statesmen as acquiescing both her condition and the hegemony of (to echo Hickman) Euro-Christianity often miss the audacity of Wheatley's willingness to comment on affairs of the state, the actions of statesmen, and the hypocrisy of celebrating and promoting America as a land of independence and free will while sustaining and depending on the rewards of the enslavement of Africans. Like many other (later) black women writers in antebellum America, she appealed to the moral sympathies of white women; however, for her understanding of her readership, she also directed her messaging to white men of influence by addressing them as what Barnard calls "domestic men"—fathers, husbands, keepers and protectors of families (38). The second chapter, "In Plain Sight: Slavery and the Architecture of Democracy," Hickman centers the affront to Roman-inspired institution and monument construction of early American architects offered by abolitionist organs like *Liberator, Liberty Bell,* and the African American-published *Weekly Advocate.* Furthermore, the author, via *Liberty Bell*, introduces author and essayist William Wells Brown's critiques of America's ironic edifices, culminating in Brown's use of such inspired construction as the backdrop of the liberatory death of the tragic protagonist in his novel *Clotel; or The President's Daughter* (1853). The enslaved Clotel, the fictionalized daughter of Thomas Jefferson, finds herself trapped between groups of slave catchers on the Long Bridge during a botched on the Long Bridge, between the Capitol and the President's home in Virginia—symbolic of liberty and independence in America—and, in her desperation for freedom, she leaps to her death (100). Barnard captures the similar tone of essayist and author Charles Chesnutt in his scathing critiques of postbellum monuments throughout the nation's capital and black Americans' continued struggles with space and place in his third and fourth chapters, "Ancient History, American Time: Charles Chesnutt and the Sites of Memory" and "Crumbling into Dust: Conjure and the Ruins of Empire." First, Bernard catalogues the writer's observations in print, in which Chesnutt finds the new United States, after bloody war and attempted reconciliation, presenting an erasure of the nation's legacies of slavery and exploitation in their attempts to reconfigure and reconnect the American message of liberty by erecting new monuments in the old style. The discussion continues in the fourth chapter as

Chesnutt fictionalizes the continued desecration of (assigned) black spaces by systemic racism and dehumanization, demonstrated through his serialized stories, his collection of short stories *The Conjure Woman* (1899), and his novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). *Empire of Ruin* concludes with "National Monuments and the Residue of History," featuring critiques of national monuments and juxtapositions of (white) American libertarian iconography with public demonstration of resistance (indirect or direct) by black activists and creators. The Lincoln Memorial figures prominently, as the backdrop of both singer Marian Anderson's defiant performance in 1939 and the location of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Justice in 1963. The chapter ends with Barnard's discussion of visual artist Kara Walker's controversial sculpture *A Subtlety* ("The Marvelous Sugar Baby"), which debuted in 2014 and featured a iconography of ancient Egypt—with a Mammy replica composed of refined white sugar and styrofoam—affecting the posture of a neoclassical image and iconography.

In Barnard's fast-moving study, there is so much unpacked but still so much left to discover. For the purpose of his text, Barnard excels at connecting and historicizing the literature and art on which he focuses. It seems that nothing is missing, but there is the exciting potential for more elaboration and development on many of his topics. For instance, a longer study of African-American contemporary art and literature (de)centering classic iconography would be a compelling follow up. The most revealing and novel segments of this text (not to shortchange his great work on the 20th and 21st century representations of black classicism or the confrontation of classical iconography by black Americans) are his discussions of Wheatley, Brown, and Chesnutt. There is much to learn about these oft-researched writers that he reveals in *Empire of Ruin.*

Poet and scholar Fred Moten's collection of essays *Black and Blur* offers a different confrontation with symbolism. While, like Hickman and Barnard, he centers "Afro-Atlantic" confrontation with the modern, transatlantic slavery, globalism, and systemic suppression and racism as one cause of the disjointed creation of new symbols and New World creations, he also holds intracultural understandings of culture and expression against one another to challenge what the reader (and the author himself) understands to be, or not be, "blackness." Blackness, Moten posits at the head of the collection, reflecting on the work of Saidiya Hartman:

> There is an open set of sentences of the kind blackness is *x* and we should chant them all, not only for and in the residual critique of mastery such chanting bears but also in devoted instantiation, sustenance and defense of the irregular. What is endowment that it can be rewound? What is it to rewind the given? What is it to wound it? What is it to be given to wounding and rewinding? Mobilized in predication, blackness mobilizes predication not only against but also before itself (viii).

When the notion of "blackness" is troubled, beyond the supposed authority and meaning of those who claim to have such, the idea is blurred. He emphasizes this idea in his essay "Interpolation and Interpelation." In his evaluation of the popular rap song "Ghetto Superstar" (1998) by Fugees-alum Pras, Moten discusses the song as indicative of symbols that validate the bourgeois mission of black success. Pras, known in the mid-1990s as part of a trio rapping and singing about black inner-city and diasporan struggle, was thought to have crossed over into mainstream banal rap with this well-received song. It also interpolates upon white American genres (country music) in its sample and was featured on the soundtrack of a mainstream motion picture (the Warren Beatty-led *Bullworth*). Hip hop, and thusly black radical expression, was coopted to some extent, Moten seems to suggest. However, Pras and hip hop journalist kris ex compose a novel of the same name (*Ghetto Superstar*), that centers the struggles of the protagonist not only to make it but survive the environmental factors that limit his access and vitality (i.e. systemic racism, police brutality). According to Moten, what Pras is able to do to for a sold-out (literally but perhaps not figuratively) song is turn the circumstance of his success on its head by inserting the hip-hop inspired story of black survival into literature, a genre perceived as bourgeois. The idea of Blackness and Afro-Atlantic expression are reclaimed then as radical:

> This becoming-object of the object, this resistance of the object that is (black) performance, that is the ongoing reproduction of the black radical tradition, that is the black proletarianization of bourgeois form, the sound of the sentimental avant-garde's interpolative noncorrespondence to time and tune, is the activation of an exteriority that is out from the outside, cutting the inside/outside circuitry of mourning and melancholia (33).

The mourning and melancholia central to narratives in both rap music and the novel *Ghetto Superstar* are indicative of a necessary reclaiming of narrative within and against the perceived-as-finite boundaries of form, feeling, expression, and meaning.

What is missing in Moten's brilliant volume will perhaps be fulfilled in the remaining volumes of the trio titled *consent not to be a single being*. *Black and Blur* is but the first offering of this series. Beyond his goal of understanding the uncertainty—the "blur"—of what blackness means and to whom and how blackness is expressed (or suppressed), the essays are indeterminable by chronology, connection of discourse, and length. However, one standout piece seems to give this reader a greater window into context of his discussion. "Nowhere, Everywhere" is a review of several exhibitions and projects of multimodal artist Theaster Gates. His projects challenge the fixity of blackness, undo the possibility of authenticity on broad display, particularly, as Moten notes, in his project *On Black Foundations*. "Theaster Gates will mess you up, if you let him," Moten warns.

> Theaster Gates will make you up if you let him. He facilitates your submission to your own critical imagining, with others. *On Black Foundations* is an antifoundational assertion of an antefoundational reality: that we mess and make each other up as we go along. This simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive social poetics is restaged again and again in Gates's objects and engagements (166).

Gates builds institutions of antifoundational (and "antefoundational") black expression within institutions—museums, buildings, academic spaces—that demand a critical, if not uncomfortable gaze. This reflects the work of Kara Walker that concludes Barnard's study as well as the disruptive positioning of a Black Prometheus that defines the work of many black abolitionist writers in Hickman's text. To be disruptive, then, is not only to disrupt symbols of American and Western hypocrisy but also to trouble the line—disrupt, interpolate upon—that limit self-expression towards the end of liberation, including rigid notions of blackness or what one can effectively be or become as black.

Statue of Liberty protestor Therese Okoumou accomplishes both a disruption of American liberation semiotics and what one perceives as blackness in her act. The national media has broadly portrayed the faces of immigration struggle as Muslim and Hispanic. The presence of a black immigrant who not only sits in mediation at the feet of Lady Liberty on behalf of those centered in this debate but also wears a shirt declaring too that "White Supremacy is Terrorism"—a nod to Black Lives Matter and other ideas and advocacy organizations for people of color in the United States—disrupts the idea of who can represent the struggle for liberty in America and who does have the authority to claim those symbols for her/himself. The imagined "whiteness of freedom" in the United States need not limit the capacity of black Americans and other marginalized groups to climb as high as they came and reclaim, remake, and rewrite the iconography as old as our independence. As Hickman, Barnard, and Moten demonstrate in their texts, what is available to be claimed for the purposes of liberty, self-expression, and autonomy have historically been limited not only by the white hold on revolutionary and historical iconography—like Prometheus, Cato, and Libertas—but how we define ourselves against the rigidity of systemic racism and imagined authenticity, per Moten, needs to be blurred and disrupted as well in the name of this claim to liberation.

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