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# A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography, 1939–1945 by Stuart Burrows (review)

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**Stuart Burrows. *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography, 1939–1945*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2008. 255 pp.**

Stuart Burrows's book makes a strangely familiar claim. Its premise traces an arc in literary history and understandings of vision and epistemology that we think we know but which, in Burrows' hands, in fact turns toward a different idea about American prose realism than one with which we're familiar (that is, that writers responded to the daguerreotype by emulating its representational fidelity). Realist writers like Hawthorne, Stephen Crane, and the early James, Burrows shows, were hardly naïve about the changes in perception wrought by a then-new technology of vision like photography. For their realism is not a version of fiction that, camera-like, seeks to reproduce the authentic surface aspect of people, objects, and places. Nor do these writers' narratives and descriptions traffic in the also common nineteenth-century assumption that the daguerreotype plumbed the interiors of such surfaces—the premise of physiognomy, which, as Burrows indicates, nineteenth-century thinking saw as proof that the photographic subject revealed an inner nature. Rather, what Burrows shows is that such writers demonstrated an uncannily early awareness of developments we ordinarily attribute to modernist, postmodern, and even twenty-first-century writers and sensibilities: the pervasive sense in modernity, and especially in American cultural life and social reality, of the simulacrum.

Burrows draws his title—and a strain of his argument—from a passage in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in which the novel's investment in metaphor and visuality is clear. Citing the women of Eatonville's observations about Janie's "white" behavior, Burrows shows them using comparative modes of thinking to understand both racial difference as well as particularly racial understandings of language. He points out that comments by other characters about Janie's behavior, such as "'It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator'" (qtd. 162), suggest the way in which "Janie's condition is itself a comment *upon* language and image. The women do not compare Janie to a 'gator, they compare Janie to the act of comparing someone to a 'gator, to seeing something familiar in something foreign" (163). Burrows's remarks appear in the context of his expanding on Barbara Johnson's familiar essay about metaphor in *Their Eyes*, showing how Johnson's claims that, in discovering metaphor, Janie learns to speak only tells part of the story. Expanding on Johnson's claims, and referring to *Their Eyes* as well as to other Hurston works like "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Burrows argues that "black language *is* metaphor, and thus to discover metaphor is to discover

language, and to discover language is to discover blackness" (161). Such a consideration allows Burrows to treat the slippage between the literal and the figurative in Hurston—but also in a visual mode like photography—and show how these categories determine our relationships to ourselves and to others.

In addition to offering a title and working premise for the book, the Hurston chapter may be its strongest as well as importantly different from the other chapters in Burrows's study. For in showing the various ways in which Janie gains a sense of self, Burrows shows how Hurston subtly traces Janie's publicly defined character, one in which, for example, she discovers her blackness in a photograph of herself as a girl or through others' commentary on her actions, the result of which is "a withdrawal from the social into a private space of self-reflection" (164). Far from making Janie appear alienated or stricken, such recognition results in "the script [of racial identity] being written by the subject herself" (159). Such a vision of self-authoring is not quite at odds with readings of the novel like Johnson's. But Burrows's elaboration of Janie's relationship to the image, and more generally, of the role in African American experience of language, visuality, and *mésconnaissance*, is highly original.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the book's strongest assertions occur in the context of discussing race. While the observations about sameness and resemblance in James's "The Real Thing" (1892) allow Burrows to make claims about what "really" passes for aristocratic status in late-nineteenth-century New York (for example, his assertion that the Monarchs are so apt as models precisely because they have been pictured as wealthy for so long), such points make a different kind of claim on our understanding than do Burrows's reading of a "racial" appreciation at work in US fiction. Bigger Thomas's dawning recognition in *Native Son* (1940) that his trial and, indeed, all of white Chicago's perception of him are real only insofar as his actions have already been processed as "typically" (or photographically) black has a greater historical, indeed ethical urgency than some of Burrows's readings of Hawthorne's prescience about visual technology in *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), say, or James's nuanced understandings of class positioning. This is true of the book generally. Elsewhere, for example, Burrows's historical analyses take on pronounced heft when he describes how the blankness of the Sutpen face pervades *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and registers, not the bearer's impassivity, but the mark of a historical erasure of both individuals and entire races. That effacing of history occurs within many Yoknapatawpha faces, including those of characters like Lucas Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), whose resemblance to Carothers McCaslin Faulkner shows is a kind of doubled doubling, both visual and linguistic (rendered in the repetition of McCaslin's rape of his own daughter twice

in the commissary ledgers). Burrows's suggestion that in Faulkner, faces—particularly African American as well as Native American faces—perform like photographs in that both are records of loss is a striking reading, and it deepens our sense of how Faulkner continues to reveal his concern over the South's racial tragedy.

In addition to offering novel readings of well-known works, *A Familiar Strangeness* is remarkably thoroughly researched. Burrows consults major critical readings of each of the works he discusses as well as prominent secondary sources for every writer and dimension of his study. And Burrows makes frequent but highly judicious use of theorists of vision, photography, and film and of related ideas, such as Deleuze and Guattari's "faciality," that don't often play a role in discussions of canonical American literature. Moments of this approach stand out arrestingly, as when Burrows finds Maurice Blanchot declaring the unsettling resemblance of the image to the corpse. Blanchot's notion is apposite to Burrows's reading of the end of *The House of the Seven Gables* and its point that even, or especially, in death, Judge Pyncheon's image is both a metonymy for his "true" self and, like the photo-corpse, resembles nothing so much as itself in its diffused, repeatable ontology.

The book ends with a theorizing of Stein's repetitions that shows them as related—but not indebted—to photography's extension into motion pictures. Burrows's rendering of the ways in which both Stein's compositional experiment and film form lack memory, in that each singular instantiation within a narrative sequence bears no perceptible trace of what comes before it, is ingenious and comes closer, it seems to me, than other recent efforts to understand how modernist literary form manifests changes in perception wrought by new visual technology. And Burrows's conclusion returns satisfyingly to his opening, in which he reads Stephen Crane's "The Five White Mice" (1898) as an early example of the stasis of experience prompted by repetitions in the way modern faces are imaged. Yet, in closing his discussion with the assertion that through Stein, as with Crane, we can see well how little change occurs in modernity and that both within and outside the story "nothing has happened" (217), Burrows belies his readers' encounter with his discussion. For in considering characters like Thomas Sutpen, Carothers McCaslin, and their offspring (of various races), Bigger Thomas, and Janie, as well as the Monarchs, Crane's Kid, and the judge, a great deal has occurred in reading *A Familiar Strangeness*. And not in ways that resemble other impressions, visual or scholarly, at all.

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