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The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry by Keith Clark (review)

Dan Colson

Studies in American Naturalism, Volume 9, Number 1, Summer 2014,
pp. 111-114 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/san.2014.0004>

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Part III: Movement toward Modernism opens with Stout's essay, which predominately disputes Porter's "Reflections on Willa Cather." Stout uses Cather's letters to retrace a few of her real—and some imagined—museum visits and her interests in specific painters to offer a thoughtful glimpse into Cather's modernist aesthetic. Pater reappears in Olga Aksakalova's "With the 'Hand, Fastidious and Bold': Bridging Walter Pater's Aestheticism and Willa Cather's Modernism" to augment her position that in *The Professor's House* Cather "is comfortably looking backward, but going certainly forward." "From British Aestheticism to American Modernism: Cather's Transforming Vision," by Jo Ann Middleton, closes this section by asserting that Cather's eclectic reading experience informs her new aesthetic, one Middleton maintains is "a very American form of modernism."

Unfortunately, the volume ends with a single, muddled essay in Part IV: Art and Religion: John J. Murphy's "Willa Cather's Sheltering Art: Cather's Cathedral and the Adams Factor," which attempts to discuss Cather's "Catholic Novels" against Henry Adams's *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. This essay, much like Peter Betjemann's and Jacqueline H. Harris's, is both overwritten and unfocused. These three essays excepted, Watson and Moseley compile a volume that delivers on its promise to "increase our understanding of Cather's aesthetic beliefs and practices and contribute immensely to our critical understanding of her work and her life."

—Theresa DeFrancis, *Salem State University*

The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry, by Keith Clark. Baton Rouge:

Louisiana State University Press, 2013. xi + 257 pp. Cloth, \$40.00;

E-book \$16.99.

Ann Petry lived from 1908 to 1997, a period spanning several peaks of African-American literature. The Harlem Renaissance blossomed during her childhood and adolescence; *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*, and *Go Tell it On the Mountain* roughly coincide with the time in which Petry wrote most prolifically; and the generation of writers including Toni Morrison and Alice Walker began writing before Petry's career ended. Despite the longevity of her life and her career, Petry remains a marginal figure, never receiving the same attention as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Morrison, or Walker. Certainly *The Street* (1946), the widely anthologized "Like a Winding Sheet," and to a lesser extent, *The Narrows* (1953) haunt the edges of our modern canon, but Petry has neither the critical, nor the

popular reputation of these figures. In *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry*, Keith Clark sets out to redress this neglect by showing Petry's centrality to twentieth-century African-American literature.

Clark's admirable effort to situate Petry within the long tradition of American literature is both valuable and, at times, surprising: he articulates the connection of her work to a diverse range of figures, from Edgar Allan Poe to Flannery O'Connor; from Phyllis Wheatley to James Baldwin; from W. E. B. Dubois to Gloria Naylor. While some of these individual connections are tenuous, collectively they assert a series of fascinating—and often overlooked—links between Petry and more well-known writers. Together, they weave a tapestry of influence and overlap with Petry running as a vital thread throughout. *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry*, then, is at its core a work of recovery, a revaluation of Petry's fiction that shows its formal complexity, its nuanced feminism and anti-racism, and, most importantly, its essentiality. As with many acts of literary recovery, we may not at first recognize the need to reconsider an author's value, so the entire text serves as its own justification: by plumbing the depths of Petry's fiction, Clark simultaneously analyzes her work and calls for further study. The results of his persistent case for Petry's importance are mixed, however. On one hand, his passion for her fiction is infectious: readers likely will be inspired to re-read *The Street*, to delve deeper into her short stories. On the other hand, Clark unwittingly limits the impact of his claims by always returning to his evaluative impulse: he works so diligently to convince us that Petry is worthy of study that he sometimes minimizes the stakes of his rich analysis of her fiction.

Clark's textual analysis itself, though, is consistently illuminating, at times brilliant. He offers extended readings of *The Street*, *The Commons*, *Country Place* (1947), "Like a Winding Sheet," "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" "Miss Muriel," "The Bones of Louella Brown," "The Witness," and "In Darkness and Confusion." Each of these analyses circulates around Clark's two central, interconnected claims about Petry: that her fiction represents masculinity as fluid, unsettled, and multiple; and that her work belongs to the gothic tradition. *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* contains six substantive chapters (in addition to a proper introduction, an opening chapter that further frames Clark's readings, and a conclusion): the first two focus primarily on masculinity; the next three address in detail Petry's gothic aesthetic; and the final chapter makes more concrete the previous chapters' implicit link between masculinity and the gothic.

The focus on masculinity is particularly insightful, as Clark elucidates the "manifold nature of black male subjectivity" in Petry's fiction.

For instance, he explores Malcolm Powther—the Treadways' butler in *The Commons*—at length. According to Clark, Petry narrates Powther as a tangled amalgam of gendered traits: he's a male mammy, an effete dandy, and perhaps a closeted homosexual; yet he also is a cuckolded husband, father of three, and reluctant kidnapper. Despite, or perhaps because of, Powther's androgyny, Petry ultimately "aligns [him] with a white hegemonic superstructure" allowing him to enjoy "masculine domination by proxy." Powther, then, exemplifies Petry's refusal to create only neatly categorized visions of the black male: his multiple roles (servant, father, kidnapper), his attachment to white and male hegemony, and the novel's condemnation of him all gesture toward the challenges faced by black men living in twentieth-century America's interstitial oppressions. Clark further suggests that Petry's diverse array of male characters emerges in part from her understated feminism: by exploring the possibilities of male sexuality and the intersection of African-American masculinity with twentieth-century American patriarchy, Petry probes the raced and gendered experience of black modernity—for men and women.

Petry's approach to race and gender appears, by many definitions, to be "radical." It is worth noting, however, that Clark's title—*The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry*—may be misleading to some. Over the last two decades, scholars like William Maxwell, James Smethurst, and Alan Wald have produced a large number of texts exploring the relationship between black American writers and the American Left through the Harlem Renaissance, to the Black Arts Movement, and beyond. In other words, they speak to the "radical" nature of much African-American literature. Ann Petry, of course, was no stranger to radical politics. In fact, many of the essays in Alex Lubin's *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left* (2007) examine Petry's work, finding traces of the period's fascination with communism and socialism. Clark's deployment of the word "radical" does not denote a tie to the Left. If anything, Clark seeks to distance Petry from her radical peers, indicating that her reputation as a sort of female Richard Wright has restricted interpretations of her work. Thus, the titular "radical" does not signify what some might imagine. Rather, Clark finds in Petry a largely novel approach to masculinity, a unique adoption of the American gothic, and a radical underappreciation of her fiction.

The literary kinship between Petry and Wright derives partly from their treatment by literary scholars who read both as naturalists. Clark takes issue with this characterization of Petry. In doing so, he blames naturalism for Petry's neglect: the "pigeonholing realm of naturalism," Clark claims, has "represented the discursive brush that would tar and taint the recep-

tion of Petry's immensely nuanced and . . . transgressive and progressive body of writing." The implication that naturalism taints a literary work, somehow precluding the discovery of nuance and transgression, seems unnecessary and reductive. Despite Clark's apparent disdain, *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* has value for those of us who study American literary naturalism, precisely because it resembles the recent scholarship Clark appears to ignore: it begins with an oeuvre recognized as naturalist, then refuses to limit its analysis to the well-trod. Instead, it expands our understanding of Petry's works and thus—perhaps unintentionally—opens future avenues for research that can more thoroughly explore naturalism's place in the history of African-American literature, naturalism's polyvalent forms, and—to borrow a phrase from Clark—naturalism's "unbounded aesthetic universe."

—Dan Colson, *Emporia State University*

Color Me White: Naturalism/Naturalization in American Literature, by Mita Banerjee. American Studies: A Monograph Series, Vol. 237. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013. 484 pp. Cloth, \$87.00.

In this wide-ranging and richly textured study, Mita Banerjee explores the intersection of American legal and literary discourses on the subject of whiteness at the turn of the century (roughly the period of the 1880s to the 1920s). Prior to this time, whiteness was a self-evident fact; however, at the end of the nineteenth century, the courts were faced with a massive influx of all ranges and shades of white and non-white immigrants and had to determine who among them was white and, by default, who was not. In case after "racial prerequisite" case, as these cases came to be called, immigrant groups came before judges to establish their whiteness, and judges, in turn, were confounded by the dearth of evidence to rule decisively on the matter, turning often to the cultural logic of "common sense" as reflected in the popular culture and literature of the time. At this time, then, race was an unstable, pseudo-scientific category that was wide open to interpretation by both the law and the literature. Banerjee examines the collusion of these two—in particular, the texts of naturalization and naturalism—to show that, for both, whiteness came to be defined in terms of its cultural performance, in spite of its indeterminacy and at the expense of those deemed to be "off-white," non-white, and (often) female. This nexus of legal and literary texts also enables Banerjee to expose