

'What Happens When We Put the Left at the Center?': Re-Reading Ann Petry's Cultural Radicalism

Alex Lubin (ed.). *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. 179 pages, ISBN 978-1578069712, 43,99€.

Taking its title from Richard Wright's influential 1938 manifesto, "A Blueprint for Negro Writing," which set out to define important paradigms for African American (protest) writing and the African American literary left in the years following its publication, the collection edited by Alex Lubin concerns itself in its seven essays with a reassessment and re-reading of Ann Lane Petry, best known for her 1946 novel *The Street*, the first novel by an African American woman which sold more than one million copies. In following up on a question succinctly phrased by Cary Nelson in a 1994 article with "what happens when we put the left at the center," the contributors focus on Petry and on her (very ambivalent) relationship to Marxism and the literary left, facets of her work which have been seldom addressed before in respective scholarship. Far from conceptualizing Petry as a 'protest writer' and placing her within a constricting framework of social realism and as part of the 'Richard Wright' school (as many older scholarly narratives did with their narrow focus on *The Street*), the collection engages instead broader aspects of the author's multifaceted cultural production.

A central aim of the edition, as editor Alex Lubin emphasizes in its introduction, is therefore to (re)locate Petry's place within the (African) American postwar left, thereby "posing new frameworks for identifying the left" and re-defining the notion of "what has come to be known as African American protest writing in the postwar years" (4). An important part of this project is to acknowledge a "vibrant radical culture of African American left writing," which, albeit oftentimes overlooked, existed during McCarthyism and the anticommunist heyday of the 1950s and included writers such as Willard Motley, Chester Himes, William Gardner Smith, Julian Mayfield, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Petry who all "used diverse literary styles and generic conventions to wage radical politics" (6). A second goal and connected to respective rethinking of such canonization practices of 1950s African American literary production is to establish Petry as an 'important link' bridging the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and in this way, providing the "groundwork" for writers such as Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison (7).

The collection's first essay "Ann Petry's 'New Mirror'" by Rachel Rubin and James Smethurst explores Petry's short fiction written between the 1940s and 1970s, which, as its two authors claim, consists of some of the most overlooked literary work in the Petry canon. Hence, Rubin and Smethurst pledge for a critical reappraisal of her short fiction, and in a second step focus on its function as an 'important link' between the 'Old Left' and the Black Arts Movement. One example, which Rubin and Smethurst point out in this regard, are Petry's gender politics which anticipate the "vital strain of African American feminism that to a significant extent emerged from the Left end of the Black Arts/Black Power spectrum" (15). The following essay by Bill V. Mullen "Object Lessons: Fetishization and Class Consciousness in Ann Petry's *The Street*" engages in a Marxist reading of Petry's most popular novel and focuses on the role of 'commodity', 'value' and on aspects of 'fetishization' in respective text. Mullen suggests that such an alternative approach will help to expand the "narrow parameters" in which Petry's career until recently has been considered and argues that *The Street* "offers readers of twentieth-century American literature a rigorous test case for the influences of Marxist cultural production, while challenging Marxist cultural production to see its influences in places it has heretofore hesitated to look" (37).

Similar to Rubin's and Smethurst's contribution, Paula Rabinowitz's essay "Pulping Ann Petry: The Case of *Country Place*," likewise aims at shedding light on a neglected text within Petry's literary oeuvre, focusing on the "dismissive attention" (50) surrounding the author's second novel. Rabinowitz synchronically situates *Country Place*, a formulaic pulp melodrama dealing with a predominantly white cast of characters, within the broader discourse of Post World War II popular culture of pulp fiction and noir, claiming that "pulp about trashy white women" (52) not only provided Petry with the means to articulate a critique of post-WWII early U.S. Cold War society, but moreover, as Rabinowitz suggests, allowed her to mask the autobiographical character of the novel and to deal with her own experiences and recollections of a husband returning from war.

Rachel Peterson's article "Invisible Hands at Work: Domestic Service and Meritocracy in Ann Petry's Novels" concentrates on the representation of African American female domestic workers in Petry's fiction. Peterson argues that the figure of the black female domestic worker functions to "demystify racial hierarchies" and to "provide a counternarrative to the sensationalist, racist stereotyping of African Americans in the popular media and mindset" (76) and hence serves as a site of resistance against capitalist exploitation, racism and white supremacy. Aesthetically, this is achieved, as Peterson points out, through the means of 'reportage' and through a close thematic and formal interrelation of Petry's fiction and her experiences as a journalist for *The People's Voice*, a progressive newspaper Petry worked for from 1942 to 1944. In its analysis of two of Petry's short stories and of her novel *Country Place*, John Charles's essay "The Home and the Street: The Dialectics of Racial Privacy in Ann Petry's Early Career," in contrast, outlines the concept of 'racial privacy' in Petry's early fiction, arguing that its dialectics constitute an important moment in the effort to reclaim the public as a site of "denigration and de-legitimation" and in the way of "projecting a space of private dignity" (98).

Melina Vizcaíno-Alemán's contribution "Counter-Modernity, Black Masculinity, and Female Silence in Ann Petry's Fiction" focuses on the interrelations of black masculinity, female silence and issues of (white) domesticity. In her analysis of *The Narrows* and of three of Petry's short stories Vizcaíno-Alemán suggests that Petry's constructions of black masculinity complicate Paul Gilroy's notion of 'counter-modernity,' demonstrating that "black masculinity is also complicit with the nation's imperialist policies abroad and with its gender performances within the home" (121-22). The concluding essay of this collection, Farah Jasmine Griffin's "Hunting Communists and Negroes in Ann Petry's *The Narrows*" situates Petry's work within the discourse of McCarthyite anticommunism and traces *The Narrows's* anti-McCarthy politics, reading the text as a "critical intervention" (142) during the height of anticommunist witch-hunting and censorship. Moreover, Griffin compares *The Narrows's* literary politics with Petry's 1950 essay "The Novel as Social Criticism," an essay which argues for the socio-political function of literature and claims that it is in *The Narrows* where Petry comes closest in realizing the "aesthetic vision" she puts forth in respective essay (148).

While the seven essays make a convincing case for a reassessment of Petry and for a re-reading of the author's relationship to Marxism and the literary left, with particularly strong essays by Rubin/Smethurst and Peterson, there are some unfortunate flaws which compromise the book's overall strength. Besides its careless editing and the fact that some essays such as the ones by Vizcaíno-Alemán or Rabinowitz lack in focus and clarity of argument, there are also factual errors which impair the reading experience. One example can be found in Griffin's discussion of Petry's participation in literary networks of the 1950s, with Griffin (correctly) arguing that Petry does "not emerge as part of groups of writers such as those gathered around Robeson's publication *Freedom Ways* [sic] or organizations such as the Harlem Writers Guild" (148). Not only due to the misspelling

does it remain unclear if Griffin actually means Robeson's 'own' publication *Freedom*, a newspaper Robeson published from 1951-55, or *Freedomways*, which refers to a later 1961-1985 publication, which, although it was influenced by Robeson's thought and civil rights activism, was not "his" own, as Griffin seems to claim. Again, a better editing job would have helped to correct such flaws and misunderstandings.

Nonetheless, despite these shortcomings, the collection achieves its goal and persuasively argues for a reassessment of Petry's body of work, for a re-evaluation of the canon of 1950s African American literature by highlighting its points of connection to the Popular Front and the Black Arts Movement and for an inclusion of Petry's lesser-known work into respective canon. While one would have wished for a discussion of Petry's children's literature in the context of the collection's focus, issues such as the investigation of Petry's relation to popular culture and her appropriation of pulp fiction, the focus on the concept of 'class' and on issues of labor, the discussion of her own theoretical writing in the form of "The Novel as Social Criticism," her journalistic engagement with *The People's Voice*, as well as her contextualization into early U.S. Cold War culture provide important new insights and add to respective scholarship. Therefore, the collection makes not only an important contribution to Ann Petry scholarship itself, but also to a broader reassessment and revision of 1950s early U.S. Cold War literary culture and will hopefully generate more related research on Ann Petry and (African) American cultural radicalism of the early Cold War and the 1950s.

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