

The Five I's of Douglas Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name* – a Literary Analysis

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Douglas A. Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name*, published in 2009, is a gruesome case study of the postbellum South and its peonage system. While Blackmon shines a particular spotlight on key characters and settings (Green Cottingham as the historical protagonist, Alabama's Tuscaloosa as the central location), he is firm in establishing that none of the atrocities described were isolated events (Blackmon, 2009). Having read this piece, my own reflective composition will achieve four things. First and foremost, I will identify Blackmon's primary and secondary themes; I will then contextualize these ideas using class lecture material and readings; I will assess Blackmon's integration of sources; finally, I will offer my own personal reaction to the book.

Understanding the book's themes is at once the simplest and most arduous task. As I read, I recognized several recurring ideas and mentally catalogued them as the five I's: (I) iteration, (II) irony, (III) immanence, (IV) inertia, and (V) insurance. The most obvious of these – previewed by the title itself, and thus also the most fundamental – is iteration. The beating heart of the book (i.e. Blackmon's thesis) is the concept that slavery was in no way abolished after the Civil War, nor after emancipation; it simply camouflaged itself. The author employs individual case studies to make this broad idea more digestible to his audience (in this manner, individualism is almost a sixth "I," but it is more of a device than a theme). He draws upon the historically obscure livelihood of Green Cottingham to demonstrate the iterative nature of peonage, using finer brushstrokes to prevent potentially desensitized readers from seeing only a muddled canvas from afar. If there is any excerpt to corroborate this core thesis, it is the following, describing Green's descent into the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Co. mines after an illegitimate arrest: "He must have studied the molded letters in the archway above the portal, spelling the name of the company that for all intents and purposes owned him then as much as Elisha Cottingham had owned his father and grandfather" (Blackmon, 2009, p. 376).

As for the remaining four I's – irony, immanence, inertia, insurance – it should be preemptively noted that none are isolated from each other, nor from the overarching themes of iteration/individualism. A less incisive analysis might simply lump them all together as the many pillars of iterative slavery, but I do think they each merit independent address.

Irony, for one, is something Blackmon himself seems acutely aware of. He presents it as both a theme (i.e. illustrating with clarity the utter delusion of Southern whites' perceptions of themselves as heroes/victims versus the population they have vilified, whilst inflicting torture and death upon them) *and* as a literary device – specifically, a tone modulator. It runs through the text like an electric current, zapping the reader into disbelief every few pages. There are many moments when one will find oneself exhaling in incredulity, oftentimes at the author's scathing juxtapositions. Take, for instance, the following excerpt: "Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad recognized that the acreage owned by the black school would be an ideal location for a new mine" (Blackmon, 2009, p. 379). The symbolism couldn't be more poignant. Another instance of irony being used as both a theme and a literary device exists in a note taped to the hanging body of an improperly tried convict: "Let this be a warning to you [n-word] to let white people alone" (Blackmon, 2009, p. 394). Irony as a theme emphasizes the delusion that white Southerners harbored in their perception of the relationship between themselves and African Americans, thus further clarifying how slavery was allowed to iterate.

Matters of delusion and skewed self-perception offer a clean segue into the next secondary I: immanence. By this, I refer to the alleged predispositions that framed the postbellum social hierarchy. That is – nature, or the natural way of things. Immanence was a particularly dangerous device, as it could be wielded by *both* scientists and churchgoers – uniting white supremacists at opposite polarities of the rationality spectrum for a common purpose, therefore doubling its efficacy. African Americans are genetically predisposed to

subservience, claimed Darwin enthusiasts. Consider physician Dr. E.C. Ferguson, who presented a whole paper documenting their similarities with barnyard animals to arrive at the following conclusion: “[African Americans] are monkey-like; has no sympathy for his fellow-man ... is a natural born thief ... His progeny are allowed to roam at large without restraint ... growing up like any animal” (Blackmon, 2009, p. 296). Contrarily, Christians claimed that African Americans were put on earth by God to serve them: “God ordained the southern white man to teach the lessons of Aryan supremacy” (Blackmon, 2009, p. 331). It mattered little how Black Americans ended up at the bottom, just that they stayed there – because that was simple nature, according to white Southerners. Blackmon’s implicit purpose here is to render the iterative nature of neo-slavery more plainly. Here, he asks a question more specific than how the cycle was allowed to repeat itself. Immanence calls into question the very morality of white Southerners; why was everyone *okay* with something so objectively inhumane? The answer is deflection. By defaulting to science or sermons, slavery seems *inevitable* – preordained by genetics or God or some vile conglomeration of the two.

The final subsidiary “I’s” that I have identified, inertia and insurance, are proximate yet separate enough that I will evaluate them concurrently. Specifically, the cultural inertia propelling antebellum slavery *into* its modernized iteration (peonage) is protected by legal infrastructure and other forms of insurance. If inertia can be represented as a plane, carrying one backwards system forward across generations, then “tradition and public pressure” can be recognized as its right and left wings, and its airborne path has been cleared by protectionist measures like Constitutional subversions and divested education (Blackmon, 2009, p. 268). To clarify the former, Blackmon references “hyper technical interpretations of U.S. law to thwart the rights of black men on a wide range of issues,” such as were used in the trial against John Pace (Blackmon, 2009, p. 325). Clearly, everything is connected. With

that pathway clear of legal debris, and no other forces exerting significant pressure to change course, there was no route to go except the very same. Indeed, Newton's first law of motion says, "An object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by a net external force" (Hall, 2024). Blackmon's emphasis is on the lack of external forces thereof. Consider the following exchange between a federal agent and a night watchman, in discussing the profitability of trading convicts: "Do you think that's right?" asked the agent; "Well," said the watchman, "everybody else was doing it" (Blackmon, 2009, p. 229). To bolster this concept, we may also recognize that neo-slavery's eventual collapse was *only* due to the exertion of those outside forces, rather than the development of any hypothetical white Southern morality; in particular, Blackmon pinpoints the impracticality of manual labor in an industrializing economy, World War II, and fear of prosecution under Northern scrutiny as these external forces (Blackmon, 2009, p. 458).

Having thus explored Blackmon's primary and secondary themes, an analysis of the piece can now be grounded in the context of this AMH2020 course. The most obvious connection I made was to Chapter 9 of *After the Fact*, written by James West Davidson and Mark H. Lytle. This chapter mechanizes the portfolio of Danish immigrant Jacob Riis to show how photography can be used as a strategic tool to warp perspectives and create bias (Davidson & Lytle, 2019). While constricted to photography, I argue that this message can be inflated to apply across mediums – including written media and film, such as those discussed in Blackmon's book. We may consider, for instance, the kindling effect produced by Thomas Dixon's duology: *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman*, whose pro-KKK ideology spurred mob violence and random attacks on "black brutes" in the name of defending "delicate [white] women" (Blackmon, 2009, p. 331).

Aside from literature, Blackmon's sources come in a variety of other forms: legal records, census data, newspapers, and photographs among them. Considering his frequent

use of imagery (“flint-eyed lawyer with a jet black beard,” “smoke belched from the gin,” “gazing out from the alabaster monument”), these more clinical sources are helpful reminders of the book’s nonfiction essence (Blackmon, 2009, p. 262, 315, 317). They also broaden the sometimes microscopic scale (an incidence of his attention to specific historical characters). On page 450, for instance, the reader learns a jarring statistic: “Of nearly 1.1 million African Americans in [Alabama], approximately half lived under the direct control and force of whites” (Blackmon, 2009, p. 450). Evidently – though his quasi-fictional impressions of Green Cottingham’s psyche are certainly evocative – basic data can sometimes have an equally shocking effect. The main area in which he lacks corroboration is, notably, personal testimonies from Green Cottingham himself. He compensates for this by using phrases like “one can only imagine” or “Green must have,” which effectively sustain his individualism approach (Blackmon, 2009, p. 370, 376).

It was my first impression, and perhaps others’, that this extrapolation of individual experiences ultimately weakened the piece. For however probable those experiences were, they nonetheless blunted the jagged edge of historical facts and figures. I also questioned the ethics of someone so far-removed from Green’s position (a white writer of the 21st century) inflicting his own ideology upon readers by mobilizing the suffering of this poor young Black man. It was not a question of how would Blackmon know how Green felt, necessarily, but a matter of what gave *him* the authority to render those feelings. My feelings were somewhat vindicated by Louis Cottingham – a descendant of Green’s – and his wife’s refusal to speak to Blackmon on the matter entirely (in the epilogue): “‘Slavery! Nothing to say about some slave!’” (Blackmon, 2009, p. 485). Still, I forced myself to reckon with a counterpoint. How else would lost history resurface? Many victims of peonage were unable to even read or write their own names; if someone else had to do it for them, then so be it. It is beyond the scope of this composition to scrutinize the designation of literary authority.

To continue my personal reflection – I do think Blackmon was mostly effective in conveying his main idea. If his thesis surrounds iteration, then the four other I's are appropriate motifs. Moreover, the material certainly validates what we have learned in class. I vividly recall Dr. Noll's lecture on the emergence of sharecropping as another savvy means of acclimating the slave system to a postbellum economy. We also learned in class and in assigned readings about the diminished education afforded to this populace, which feeds back into my previous theory about insurance (i.e. bolstering the system in much the same way as Constitutional subversions). I would be curious to investigate Blackmon's other works.

References

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