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BLACK FREEDOM

Rinaldo Walcott

The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom

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\$23.95 Reviewed by Ibrahim Bahati

This book is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand how race relations still affect much of everyday socio-economic and political life in North America, Europe, and the rest of the world. The book asserts that Black people (especially in Europe and the Americas) have not yet obtained freedom of self-determination, as humans worthy of being protected under the rule of law. The absence of Black people's freedom exists because it has neither legislative nor extrajudicial protection. In the United States, for instance, Walcott denotes that "the legislation passed to end chattel slavery did not allow those newly unowned peoples fully to become a part of the polities where they live. Instead, emancipation legislation held the formerly enslaved in captive relationship to their very recent past." Thus, he reminds the reader that what we regard today as emancipation for Black people has not yielded their total freedom. Total "freedom is extra legislative, it exists beyond the confines of law as the mode of experiencing life without bounds." The book explains that Black people continue to be viewed through a colonial lens as if they still existed in the slave plantations. Therefore, what we have today is an organized form of post-slavery governance that is trying to break away from chattel slavery ordinances where Black people's acts of self-determination were criminalized. The example of "prisons, refugee and immigration centers, detention camps" are some of the sites where Black lives continue to be controlled and perish in many Western countries. The police institution is another site wherein Black people are killed for being suspected of sleeping (like Breonna Taylor in 2020 & Amir Locke in 2022); selling untaxed cigarettes (Eric Garner 2014) having a counterfeit \$20 bill (George Floyd in 2020), or walking back home (Trayvon Martin 2012, Elijah McClain 2019), among others. The opposite of this brand of policing is the peaceful detention of white supremacists like James Eagan

Holmes (who killed twelve people and injured seventy others in a 2012 shooting in Colorado); Dylann Roof (who murdered Black worshippers in Charleston church shooting in 2015); and Kyle Rittenhouse (who, in 2021, killed two people and injured one in a Kenosha Black Lives Matter protest). The double standards of racialized policing in the United States explains why middle-class white Americans may appreciate police officers as guardians who “serve and protect,” compared to Black Americans who live in fear of the police killing them and hurting their family members (Pickett et al. 2022).

Walcott’s book also focuses on analyzing how the rise of European colonialism still affects the political landscape of today’s Europe, US, and Canadian states who have not let go of colonial practices such as labor exploitation, the gentrification of Black neighborhoods, racial profiling when hiring in workplaces, etc. Black and Brown people are presented as neither fully emancipated nor fully liberated in a post-colonial world. In the United States, for example, medical institutions invented “new beings or a life-form called Black” within which every person who is Black gets subjected to the same diagnosable biases such as not feeling pain when they are sick. The modern practices of medicine which exist in the USA have been possible at the cost of using Black lives as medical experiments in the fields of gynecology and cancer research (such as the immortalized cells of Henrietta Larks), among others. In recent times where mass shootings (by white youths) have become common in American schools, Black and Brown’s people have been used as medical experiments to offer explanations as to whether the rise in white people’s violence could be hereditary (Washington 2006, p.278). The above acts are instrumental in normalizing Black people’s death “as the source or site to give or extend those marked as human their lives. It is precisely because Black life dies that Euro-American life is possible.” Therefore, to be categorized as European or North American (hence Euro-American) ‘means to be white and everybody else has to hyphenate’—as Toni Morrison said it.

Furthermore, in attempting to show how Black people make their life possible despite being categorized as not human, three themes emerge out of the whole book. The first one is Black life-forms, which is central to the author’s re-imagination of Black freedom. Black-life forms are lived life experiences and practices of how Black people make life possible through music (such as rap, jazz, funk, etc.), hair, food, fashion trends, and beauty styles, use of their bodies, sexuality, and language (the vernacular) to express their being. Walcott elucidates that Black life-forms is an alternative genre and a resistance to “Euro-American *partial forms of life*” where Black people reclaim their humanness. However, since Black people’s expressivity continues to be approached in the spaces of non-human, “Black life-forms are forced to make the deadly zone of the Americas a residence,

and a site of life-making” where to be Black is to be susceptible to “violent death.” Trying to limit Black people’s expressivity results in the second theme: Black death—the multiple ways in which Black people continue to be controlled and made to perish. Walcott asserts that the “zone of the Americas is a zone of and for the production of Black death” since in the foundations of such modern states (USA, Haiti, Brazil Canada, etc.), Black and Brown people are still approached as not human in the rule of law.

For there be a realization of Black freedom (third theme) therefore, Europe and North America need to revisit how they accord who is a human in their political, economic, and social systems. Walcott suggests a ‘new humanism’ discourse (the idea that all of us are human) in which Black people are less tokenized in political systems while creating a “world that exists beyond the realm of the juridical and that allow for bodily sovereignty.” People of Color should be allowed (like ‘white’ people) to find what makes them common or different “in a world nonhierarchical and nonviolent.” In the praxis of the ‘new humanism,’ Walcott asserts that:

“Black freedom is not just freedom for Black subjects; it is a freedom that inaugurates an entirely new human experience for everyone. Black freedom, then, is not one kind of freedom that sits alongside other kinds of freedom; it is a global reorienting and radical reordering phenomenon.”

From the above, the Global North in particular, needs to find ways to break away from “post-Columbus colonial frames of experiencing humanness” which castaway Black people in “postmodern conversation on what [being] human means.”

Finally, the book is a concise short read of 109 pages (excluding author’s notes and bibliography), comprised of twenty-two short interconnecting chapters. The chapters also contain ample reference tools from prominent authors in African and Black studies scholarship. Chapter One to Four explain what Black freedom means in reference to Black life-forms and how a racialized society engineers’ social death or a deathly living for Black people based on the notion that they are not-human. Other chapters investigate the sites where Black life-forms emerged out of tragic spaces where Black people were controlled and perished such as in slavery plantations (Chapter Five), slave ships (Chapter Twelve), Black music or funk (Chapter Sixteen), Black men’s fashion and male body (Chapter Eighteen and Nineteen). The book ends with plausible reconsiderations on how to decolonize future Black studies while reimagining what Black freedom means in today’s period of the Long Emancipation. Walcott recommends that Black studies in the diaspora need to contextualize how neo-colonial oppression is globally interconnected with other marginalized groups

such as Native Americans. For example, he says that neoliberal programs aimed at “bringing ‘in’ Indigenous peoples” in Canada or USA become participatory, or justice oriented “only if and when resources in territories or the territories themselves are needed for capitalism’s expansion.” Capitalism uses corporate multiculturalist lies to provide “Sensations of freedom” that performatively gaslight the marginalized into believing that they are being emancipated only to stagnate towards freedom. It is what James Baldwin cautions us in *The Fire Next Time* (1963): that words such as “independence” and “integration” are limiting to Black people’s freedom around the world. That is, such discourses are meaningless since Europe has never left Africa and Black people in the United States were never free. Therefore, to deny such is to undermine how such empty promises continue to have “great implications for us all.”

