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Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie. *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. xix + 272 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3232-6; ISBN 978-0-8071-4364-3.

Reviewed by Robert Desrochers
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Transnationalism and a Lost Black Atlantic World

This is a book about the cultural politics of public celebration in the nineteenth-century black Atlantic. It is also a study of how shifting social and political contexts modify the ways in which far-flung groups of people honor and arrange time and space. One reads J. R. Kerr-Ritchie's original and urgently argued book and is reminded that some dates are more important to world history than others, and that August 1, 1834, merits remembrance on those grounds. For on that day, slavery in the British Empire legally ended.

National emancipation freed nearly 800,000 slaves, mostly in the West Indies. It also inspired annual commemorations in the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada that mobilized community opposition to racial oppression and slavery where it still existed. In the United States, August First festivals drew some of the "largest independent gatherings by people of African descent," attracting between five and seven thousand participants before the Civil War (p. 107). As it evolved, August First became an occasion for forging group identities and promoting pan-African ideologies of freedom. In short, J. R. Kerr-Ritchie argues, the rites of August First helped define the black Atlantic world in the thirty years after 1834 as a cultural community, the transnational politics of which challenged allegiance to one or another nation-state.

Based on published materials and research in Canadian, British, American, and West Indian archives, *Rites of August First* combines the methodological approach taken by recent studies of festive politics and ritualized nationalism with Paul Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's notion of a politicized Atlantic proletariat.[1] Students of black culture in the age of Atlantic slavery will not be surprised to read, early on, that British officials who presided over the earliest August First ceremonies in Trinidad and Jamaica presented emancipation as the "the gift of a benevolent state" (p. 28), while freed people expressed dutiful joy about attending sanctioned events, even as they went about constructing less staid commemorations that adapted cultural practices such as Jonkonnu, Carnival, and Canboulay. But this was not cultural autonomy for its own sake. As social control lost ground to social politicization, black West Indians sped the transition to freedom while expressing growing "solidarity with their oppressed fellows" in "'Every parts of the worlds"' (p. 48).

Two trajectories emerge from this discussion of West Indian abolition, each of which suggests persistent social strain. One source of tension is primarily racial, and entails conflict between whites and blacks over who decides what emancipation means. Another fissure has more to do with class, and plots a course for cultural expression in which elite leadership succumbs to more democratic forms. These themes recur in the book's next four chapters, on the contested meaning over time of August First in the United States and Canada West.

Convinced of the "safety, efficiency, and progress" (p. 54) of West Indian emancipation, members of the new American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) flooded the mails in the 1830s with literature urging immediate, uncompensated abolition in the United States. In turn, bands of antislavery activists began turning northern pulpits into platforms for commemorating the end of West Indian slavery. Kerr-Ritchie argues that these localized "church commemorations," like the earliest observances in the Caribbean, rang conservative notes of thanksgiving, providential intervention, and moral suasion. But the urgency and violence that accompanied struggles over American slavery's expansion rendered these services obsolete. By the 1840s, militancy and popular mobilization moved August First rituals out of doors, where they morphed into multiracial antislavery picnics attended by large crowds, public processions, and an over-

abundance of eating, singing, and speechifying. For reformers who increasingly thought globally and acted locally, moving "from the pulpit to the grove" (p. 66) encouraged a brand of immediatism much more committed to venerating the success of West Indian abolition.

Even as they participated in these festivities, African Americans staged their own August First celebrations. Kerr-Ritchie documents 119 August First festivals organized by and for people of African descent between 1837 and 1861. They took place in thirteen different northern states, in the upper Midwest, as far south as Delaware, and as far west as Kansas and California. Brass bands played, black militias mustered, and black benevolent societies marched "with banners, flags, and mottoes proclaiming their political beliefs" (p. 103). Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, however, they did so mostly in ways that reflected the "moral reform agenda of the black elite" (p. 88). Again, this top-down stewardship diminished over time. Especially after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, as northern blacks steeled themselves against slave catchers backed by federal government authority, they, too, moved into the streets and groves. Vigilance committees organized to protect themselves and the flood of runaways into northern communities. Images of "militant fugitives and marching soldiers" (p. 185) replaced images of prostrate, pleading, or grateful slaves thankful for freedom. And a rising generation of activists announced that "August First was not a national surrogate, but a critical commemoration and forecast of international liberation for all people of African descent" (p. 219). Citing Samuel Ringgold Ward's observation that "the young blacks of the Republic are everywhere acquiring a love for martial pastimes," Kerr-Ritchie notes that the new Pan-Africanism increasingly espoused militancy (p. 173). Alongside the democratization of public space for political purposes, this "trajectory toward militarization" (p. 166) drives much of the book's argument for change over time.

Among this book's many strengths is its careful attention to black abolitionism as a process. Moreover, its main argument, that "national and elite-based approaches toward August First" downplay "important acts of racial solidarity" is well taken and well argued (p. 106). But one does wonder if Kerr-Ritchie's use of transnationalism, by which he means to "convey the sense of beyond, passing, carry over, transcending," bears the interpretive weight ascribed to it (p. 12). For instance, it is not clear what was particularly or necessarily transnational about African American runaways and free black abolitionists, forced into Canada by events back home, continuing to protest American slavery once they got there. And is it "only through cross-national approaches" that we can appreciate blacks' role "in challenging American slavery in the Atlantic world" (p. 167)? Could one question "an older agenda of civic incorporation" (p. 162) while working toward inclusion in a new-modeled version? And where does all this leave someone like Frederick Douglass? Kerr-Ritchie argues that scholars with "multicultural aspirations" have chosen Douglass to "represent black abolitionist thought and actions" partly to silence or ignore "alternative representations" deemed "radically irrelevant" (pp. 193-194). One might ask in the first place how Douglass's inclusion in the conversation precludes considering the "international politics of national liberation and revolutionary emancipation" (p. 194). Moreover, if fugitive and legally free black Americans in Canada engaged in a transnational freedom struggle in the 1850s, did not Douglass do the same when he spoke to abolitionist crowds in England and Ireland? Or, late in life, when he served as United States ambassador to the black republic of Haiti? Or when he commenced publishing a newspaper, the *North Star*, the stated objective of which was not only to "hasten the day of FREEDOM" for enslaved Africans in the United States, but also "to attack Slavery in all its forms and aspects" and "Advocate Universal Emancipation?"[2]

Despite its appeal to an ill-defined radicalism, in the end it seems Kerr-Ritchie's transnationalism produces global solidarity along lines that bridge neither race nor class. Thus, for instance, it was fellow Africans who freed themselves in the British West Indies in 1834 and in the French West Indies in 1848, "not simply the inevitability of human progress" (p. 218). This last statement, true so far as it goes, connects to the book's critique of both nineteenth-century liberal reformers and historical accounts of abolitionism informed by varieties of twentieth-century liberalism. Kerr-Ritchie argues that nineteenth-century liberalism made it fashionable to oppose slavery in the abstract, but less as a practical and political matter. If such a view does not exactly transform white abolitionists once again into cranks and crackpots, it unnecessarily questions the commitments of many who spoke out against slavery and faced the same threats of violence as African Americans. And it does all this in the name of counteracting the "white liberal insistence on defining black identity and protest" that "bedeviled" abolitionist movements and "continues to stalk academic corridors" (p. 222). Other than a passing reference to David Brion Davis, the author never really identifies the "neo-abolitionists" whose attachment to the nation and to liberal ideals of liberty and freedom all but guarantees their inability to appreciate what was political about

black Atlantic culture. A more effective case might have been made by engaging in direct debate, or at least leading readers to relevant sources. But then, the entire critique presupposes that the limitations and failures of late twentieth-century liberalism or its antecedents remain relevant enough to argue against in the first place.

Ironically, it is precisely Kerr-Ritchie's point that black abolitionism rejected the modernist paradigm that "moral progress" was the "foundation of Western civilization" (p. 238). In the long run, the rites of August First laid a foundation for black-led civil rights and anticolonialist campaigns in the twentieth century. Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association commemorated August First in 1934 by leading a march through the streets of Kingston, Jamaica. In Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams inspired packed throngs to resist colonialism by reminding them about West Indians' first emancipation. In contrast, by the 1930s African Americans no longer marked the anniversary of British abolition, and a once important underpinning of the black Atlantic world had been lost.

Other aspects of that world await recovery. Frederick Douglass recalled that, before the *North Star* achieved a circulation that surpassed that of the *Liberator* and included black and white readers in Europe, the West Indies, and Canada, the fledgling paper relied on fundraising "festivals and fairs" to keep it going.[3] One wants to know whether black communities after 1834 injected transnationalism into these and other expressions of festive culture, for instance ostensibly nationalistic Fourth of July observances.[4] Nuanced analyses that neither render black abolitionists as supplicants, ignore cracks in the façade of the abolitionist internationale, nor exalt the gifting of black freedom by white philanthropists, heighten appreciation for the richness of black cultural expression, the sophistication of black political consciousness before emancipation, and the complexity of black political leadership that incorporated national and international impulses. They might even provide a glimmer of hope for the future. "The power of African-descended people to overthrow slavery and colonialism," Kerr-Ritchie writes in conclusion, "points to a collective capacity" to build a more "decent alternative to the destructive tendencies of the modern world" (p. 244). One wishes we all might join in this, the struggle of our common humanity.

Notes

[1]. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000). Works on nationalism include David Waldstreicher, *In The Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); and Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

[2]. Frederick Douglass, "Prospectus," *North Star*, Nov. 5, 1847, 4.

[3]. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Boston: DeWolfe and Fiske, 1892), 325-326.

4]. Daniel E. Walker argues for just such a confluence at Congo Square in New Orleans, and at El Día de Reyes (The Day of the Three Kings) festivals in Havana, in *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

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