



Rinaldo Walcott. *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 144 pp. 423.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4780-1405-8.

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Dr. Rinaldo Walcott's *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* is a welcome addition to the fields of race theory and Black studies. Walcott contends that for Black people, freedom is but an illusion as new barriers, real or imagined, have been erected to curtail their freedom, or as Walcott describes, mark their continued unfreedom. The book takes a global perspective in looking at the idea of unfreedom, especially as it pertains to the legacies of slavery and colonialism, adopting a similar argument made by Mahmood Mamdani in *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996) that colonialism essentially categorized people into citizens and subjects. While incorporating the legacies of colonialism, *The Long Emancipation* takes a much broader approach to analyzing the legacies of inequality and the struggle for Black freedom.

Walcott's central argument is that at every moment Black peoples have sought, for themselves, to assert what freedom might mean and look like, those desires and acts toward freedom have been violently interdicted (p. 1). Walcott frames this argument using the term "Black life form," which he uses to push back against Euro-American definitions and practices of the human

that offer Black life no conceptual or actual space within the terrain of the human (p. 9). Although stymied in both progress and humanization, Black people have used movement, both spatial relocation and cultural expression, to experience any modicum of autonomy and freedom. Although the book is short in length, only 109 pages, it is broken down into twenty-two chapters. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 10, and 14 further explore the idea of the "Black life form." Each of these addresses the ways in which Black people have been essentially "Othered" through a denial of belonging or even citizenship.

Walcott further explores the importance of cultural expression through artistic and linguistic avenues in chapters 15 through 19. He argues that the inability to think clearly and concisely about the intention of Black people in the Americas remains one of the central political shortcomings of many artistic/intellectual and activist conversations (chapter 16). Cultural expressions were a means of fashioning an alternative reality and to legitimate the idea of Blackness. The idea of movement is central to chapters 5, 7, 11, and 12, which are some of the most poignant chapters in the book. For instance, Walcott uses the idea of the plantation to show how that idea of restriction of

movement and subordination has been institutionalized not only mentally, but also structurally. Walcott builds off of Katherine McKittrick's "Plantation Futures" to point to the fact that the restriction of Black freedom is tied to the plantation, where Black people are seen merely as capital and everything else is a threat to Euro-American progress (chapter 5). This limitation of movement goes even further back, as Walcott points to the idea of the slave ship and relates that to the limitation on Black movement and to white supremacy, a feature of neoliberal states (chapter 11).

The Long Emancipation is an amalgamation of similar works rather than a nuanced historical argument. The book is grounded in secondary works, a number of which are Walcott's own. While the book is concise in its structure and argument, the layout is a bit clumsy as the chapters tend to repeat similar themes and arguments and could instead be combined to cut down on the number of chapters in such a short work. Walcott does not try to distinguish himself from similar works and merely positions this work within the larger historiography. However, Walcott offers a critique of current African diasporic studies at the institutional level by arguing that the current approach is too narrow in scope. He contends that Black diaspora thought should be expanded to include European attempts to conquer North America largesse and the inauguration of transatlantic slavery, which he dates to 1492. Expanding the scope, Walcott argues, creates avenues for a more honest global conversation about what that expansion set in motion. Here, Walcott pushes back against the likes of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993). While Walcott offers a broader approach to critiquing Black diasporic studies, he is hesitant to completely denounce Gilroy's "Atlanticist" approach.

Walcott is successful in pointing out the limitations of Black studies as they relate to both time and place. *The Long Emancipation* contends that since the abolition of slavery by Britain in 1834,

Black people have only experienced modicums of freedom. These "sensations of freedom," as Walcott calls them, have been supported by institutions, from colleges to governments. It is the institutionalization of Black studies that continues to "Other" Black people, rendering them nonhuman. This argument is similar to the argument found in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2014) by sisters Karen and Barbara Fields, whose central argument is that racism and inequality work together to perpetuate "Otherness" of non-white groups. Walcott offers a solution to fixing Black studies, which is to remove enslaved people and Blackness from Black studies. Doing so would force white people to take matters into their own hands by challenging racially institutionalized structures of authority. Anything short of that, as Walcott contends, would just be further engaging in sensations of freedom, "profoundly violating the sovereignty of Black life-forms and their knowledges" (p. 102). This is where Walcott lumps himself in with the likes of Karen and Barbara Fields but for the most part, *The Long Emancipation* is a welcome historiographical addition to the field of race theory.

The Long Emancipation is a well-constructed synthesis of race theory and Black studies. It brings in a variety of secondary sources, a few of which are Walcott's own works, to form a cohesive narrative of the field of Black studies and issues that have shaped the othering and dehumanization of Black people. I highly recommend this book as a launchpad for those interested in the subjects of Black studies and race theory or as a textbook for a graduate course focused on the African diaspora or race theory.

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