Reflections on African American Experiences

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Reflecting on the Notion of Emancipation

Despite its promise of autonomy, the emancipation of most enslaved people in 1863 did not guarantee equal levels of freedom for African-descended people and white Americans. Rather, African-descended people had their level of freedom determined for them by whites in positions of political or social power. Ultimately, not all African-descended people were freed (from slavery) by the Emancipation Proclamation, and even those that were suffered at the hands of an anti-integrationist government and their white neighbours. In this way, white people denied them autonomy and mobility, and thus the difference between notions of "freedom from" and "freedom to" becomes particularly salient.

This notion of white power over African-descended freedom is particularly evident in the Emancipation Proclamation in that it only freed a select group of enslaved people (i.e., those in the South) on the basis of military enlistment. Essentially, in only emancipating slaves in Confederate states, the Union weakened the Confederate military, strengthened their own, and maintained their sense of Unionism with all Union-supporting states.[1] In this way, the Union acted in its own self-interest and thus abused its power over African-descended people and their calls for freedom. Moreover, this group of newly freed people was only so free in that they were immediately obligated to fight for a nation that had never offered them any protection or respect. Therefore, despite the Proclamation's claim that "this act [was] sincerely believed to be an act of justice," its selectivity speaks to the Union's true priorities (i.e., Unionism), and by extension their abuse of power over African-descended freedom.[2]

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[1] Kate Masur, "Everywhere is Freedom and Everybody Free: The Capital Transformed," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 276.

[2] "The Emancipation Proclamation," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 255.

Moreover, the Lincoln administration's consideration of Black emigration from the United States reveals the extent of the Union's power over African-descended people and their freedom. This consideration was rooted in the white supremacist belief that white and Black races were inherently incompatible and thus had to be segregated.[3] While Lincoln's consultation of "selected delegations" from "African American church congregations" was a significant step toward white-Black reconciliation, this group was so select (i.e., male, elite) and therefore could not represent all African-descended voices.[4] The "delegations" themselves recognized their privilege, claiming that "the views of all black residents" were too diverse to be represented by such a small group.[5] In this way, Lincoln's selectivity reveals how little autonomy most African-descended people had at the hands of the Union. Thus, Lincoln's consideration of Black emigration and insufficient consultation of a few African-descended people further highlights white politicians' power over African-descended freedom.

Lastly, free African-descended Washingtonians were terrorized by their white neighbours upon celebrating emancipation. Specifically, many white Washingtonians "smash[ed] church windows, set fire to buildings, and attack[ed] African Americans on the streets".[6] Essentially, while these white Washingtonians were not in political positions of power, they restricted African-descended people's sense of safety and mobility, and thus asserted social power over them. In this way, whites' terrorization of African-descended people emphasizes how little freedom the latter was given by whites in positions of social power.

Thus, although most African-descended people were freed from the clutches of slavery in 1863, they were only granted a small amount of autonomy and mobility by the Union and white

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[3] Masur, 271.
[4] Ibid., 271.
[5] Ibid., 271.
[6] Ibid., 283.

public. In this way, freedom from slavery was not synonymous with the freedom to live safely and comfortably in the United States. Ultimately, this discourse on African-descended autonomy and mobility remains significant because there is still little African-descended representation in political settings and a high rate of racially motivated violence in the form of police brutality.

Reflecting on the Ubiquity of White Power in the South

Racial segregation came to exist in school, hospital, asylum, cemetery, restaurant, hotel, and some consumer settings by the early twentieth century, cementing its status as a ubiquitous practice. But despite white southerners' desire to keep public spaces segregated, they invaded and asserted power over African-descended spaces too. Ultimately, this sense of confinement drove many African-descended people from their homes, in that they felt they could not escape the ubiquity of white power in their towns. Essentially, each of these events reveal white power's status as ubiquitous in the South.

Firstly, southern whites implemented segregation in as many spaces as possible, including white-owned businesses. Specifically, some white storeowners mistreated African-descended customers so as to assert racial power over them. This mistreatment included "control[ing] what African American southerners bought with their limited credit and rarer cash", only permitting them to purchase low-quality versions of their products, and refusing to "provide [shopping] assistance".[7] In this way, white storeowners endangered the financial stability of their businesses, in that many African-descended customers would have boycotted these stores. This risky decision on the part of white storeowners reveals the extent to which the upkeep of white supremacy was

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[7] Grace Elizabeth Hale, "'For Colored' and 'For White': Segregated Consumption in the South," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 342, 348.

important to white Americans. Therefore, segregation existed both in spaces in which its implementation did not negatively impact whites and those in which it could have.

Secondly, southern whites invaded African-descended spaces while also maintaining control over their own spaces and thus asserted racial dominance in all segregated places in the South. For example, some theatres, which typically kept racialized individuals in balconies, allowed whites to move into these spaces if their seats filled up, thus ordering its original occupants to move or leave.[8] In this way, African-descended people did not have authority over any sort of space in the southern United States. Ultimately, the fact that white Americans had primary access to both white and African-descended spaces further highlights the ubiquity of white power in the South.

Lastly, the exodus of African-descended people as early as 1877, and again in the twentieth century (i.e., the Great Migration), suggests that they could not escape the ubiquity of white power if they remained in their towns. Specifically, in the late nineteenth century, most African-descended migrants moved westward, particularly to Kansas, while in the twentieth century many moved into northern cities.[9] This eventual move to the North suggests that white supremacy existed in Kansas too, cementing white power's ubiquity in the South. It should also be noted that decisions to move homes over such a long distance were not easily made, which suggests that African-descended people saw it as the best or only way of escaping white power.

All in all, white power existed in all parts of southern American society, as demonstrated by the implementation of segregation into white-owned businesses and whites' invasion into African-descended spaces. Ultimately, the ubiquity of white power drove many African-

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[8] Hale, 346.
[9] "Black Southerners Look Toward Kansas, 1877," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 321.

descended people in search of racial equality from their homes and into northern cities. However, anti-Black racism did not exist solely within the South, but in the North too, in that no racist sentiments are absolutely confined to one set of (regional/state) borders.

Reflecting on Black Women Activists' Understanding of Female Identity

Black women in the United States have been at a double disadvantage since slavery in that they are victims of both racism and sexism. While many Black women activists during the "New Negro" Movement rejected past female identities (i.e., women as gentle, nurturing, domestic), they also appealed to and twisted the meanings of these traits to assert their capability in activist environments. Ultimately, in reclaiming those outdated understandings of female identities and advocating for female independence, Black women activists created significant change in the fight for gender equality.

Firstly, in accepting these ostensibly feminine traits, Black women activists twisted those confining views of female identity to assert their status as powerful beings, and in this way rejected outdated understandings of female identity. Specifically, many argued that "women were more nurturing, moral, and altruistic" than "belligerent, aggressive, and selfish" men, and were therefore "better suited than men for social welfare work".[10] Thus, Black women activists reclaimed traits that American societies used to justify women's confinement to domestic and family spaces and presented them as evidence of their own capability. Furthermore, Amy Jacques Garvey emphasizes the importance of "a good mother" and her ability to raise morally correct children in

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[10] Deborah Gray White, "Race and Feminism," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 368.

activist environments, and thus asserts Black mothers' status as successful leaders.[11]   Therefore, Black women activists used these generally confining gender roles to argue for their capability in activist settings and put themselves at the centre of Black activism. In this almost paradoxical way, they rejected what Garvey called the "doll-baby" identity and moved toward that of "the wide-awake woman".[12]

Secondly, while there was some disagreement among Black clubwomen, they generally agreed on the importance of increased female independence.[13] Ultimately, they rejected the notion that their relationships with men (blood or marital) were the only channels through which they could voice their concerns. Specifically, Garvey discusses the importance of women "tak[ing] their places beside their men," or rather of standing next to them as equals.[14] In this way, she presents women as separate and equally autonomous beings. Furthermore, Garvey's subtle use of the words "their [i.e., women's] men" twists the common narrative that shows women through their relationships to men. Here, Garvey presents men through their relationships to women, and therefore puts women at the centre of this discussion on activism. Thus, she rejects the notion that women are only relevant because of their relationships with men and asserts women's status as independent beings.

All in all, Black women activists facilitated change in that they presented women as better suited for activism than men and as independent beings capable of achieving racial and gender equality. Essentially, they twisted this understanding of women as too gentle for activism to argue for the importance of gentleness in caring for Black individuals (i.e., through social welfare) and

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[11] Amy Jacques Garvey, "Amy Jacques Garvey Calls for Black Women to Become Leaders, 1925," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 384.
[12] Garvey, 385.
[13] White, 371.
[14] Garvey, 384.

justifying their roles as leaders. However, it is important to recognize that no trait exists solely within the confines of one gender, but that traits such as the ones mentioned in this reflection can exist in people of all genders. Additionally, while, in the above quotations, Black women activists spoke about women's shared social struggles, it should be noted that white women's plight was not equal to that of Black women. Specifically, the latter, who remain at the intersection of racism and sexism, faced (and still face) more discrimination than the former. In this way, Black women, as well as all women of colour, offer unique and meaningful insight into the ways in which American societies can achieve social equality.

Reflecting on African Americans' Status as Americans

Malcolm X's 1963 speech on the definition of revolution challenges the meaning of American citizenship which promised all citizens a sense of inclusion within the nation-state's borders. Ultimately, the United States accepted African Americans as citizens insofar as they proved useful to the country, or more specifically could fight on its behalf, but often fell short in protecting them. The speech also highlights how little autonomy the United States granted African Americans on the land that many of them considered their home. In this way, Malcolm X maintains that, despite its benefitting from African Americans' military contributions, the United States refused to treat African Americans as absolute citizens.

Firstly, Malcolm X exposes the United States' exploitation of African American men by highlighting the nation-state's approval of violence against national enemies and its disapproval of violence for protecting African Americans. Specifically, he claims that, in the context of the Vietnam War, "You [African Americans] bleed for white people, but when it comes to your own

churches being bombed and little black girls murdered, you haven't got any blood…".[15] Ultimately, the United States' sending African Americans across seas as soldiers and national representatives suggests that it saw violence as crucial in protecting Americans and that it recognized African Americans as Americans in the context of international war. However, in highlighting this unmet need for self-defence among African Americans, Malcolm X implies that the American government offered them no military protection, despite its eagerness to protect Americans against international threats. Thus, the United States' unwillingness to combat domestic racial terror (such as the bombing of Black churches and murder of Black girls) suggests that it did not consider African American safety as worthy of protection. Furthermore, in claiming that African Americans "bleed for white people," Malcolm X rejects the notion that African American participation in international warfare is for the protection of the United States, but for that of white people. In this way, he uses race, rather than nationality, to create a dichotomy between white and Black Americans, and therefore undermines the notion of American identity.

Secondly, Malcolm X touches on concepts of nationalism and land ownership to highlight African Americans' lack of autonomy in the United States. Specifically, he argues that most African Americans participating in the Civil Rights Movement "aren't asking for any nation— they're trying to crawl back on the plantation".[16] The word "plantation", which is a synecdoche for American land,[17] alludes to the sites in which slaveholders, and more broadly white Americans, stripped enslaved people of their autonomy. In claiming that African Americans were "trying to crawl back on the plantation" at the time of this speech, Malcolm X implies that "the plantation,"

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[15] Malcolm X, "Malcolm X Defines Revolution, 1963," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 475.
[16] Malcolm X, 476.
[17] It should be noted that the term "American land" in this reflection speaks only to the way in which Americans exercised state control over western land and does not suggest that this land rightfully belongs to Americans.

or rather the ghost of slavery, had never been abolished, and thus that African Americans still did not have much autonomy. Furthermore, their "trying to crawl *back*" (emphasis added) to this land suggests that African Americans had been exiled by the American government in some way and therefore that they could not live freely on American land upon their figurative return. In this way, Malcolm X challenges the belief that American land is African Americans' home and thus questions their status as American citizens.

Therefore, Malcolm X uses the United States' exploitation and oppression of African Americans to challenge the idea of American citizenship and the ways in which it did or did not apply to African Americans. Ultimately, this notion of American citizenship as conditional on race is white centrist in that it understands the archetypal American as white, and more broadly assumes white as default.

Reflecting on the Criminalization of Drugs

Drug criminalization in 1980s America provided an excuse for increased police supervision in mainly Black and Latino neighbourhoods and in turn led to mass Black and Latino incarceration. But despite these facts, white politicians rendered this association of race with drugs invisible, and so much of antidrug sentiment became a front for anti-Black and -Latino racism.

In presenting "drugs" as the ultimate threat to Americans, the political phrase "war on drugs" blurs the fact that this so-called "war" disproportionately targeted racialized individuals. Specifically, by 2000, African Americans comprised 31% of California's prisoners, despite accounting for only 7% of the Californian population.[18] Additionally, "the state applied

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[18] Donna Murch, "Crack in Los Angeles: Crisis, Militarization, and Black Response to the Late Twentieth-Century War on Drugs," in *Major Problems in African American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. Barbara Krauthamer and Chad Williams (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2018), 554-5.

militarization unequally by focusing on historic African American and Latino neighbourhoods".[19] Essentially, the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans and the installation of police officers in racialized communities reveal the state's racist motivations, despite the ambiguity of the phrase "war on drugs". Furthermore, this blurring of state motivations caused many to misconstrue racist sentiments for concern for the safety of drug-threatened communities. So, in expressing their opposition to drugs, white supremacists could convey their racist beliefs without explicitly doing so. For example, in 1990, an LAPD chief claimed that "the casual drug user ought to be taken out and shot".[20] Considering the large number of police officers occupying Black communities in California, it seems that this officer specifically sought to use violence on Black individuals. Moreover, his use of the word "ought" suggests that he considered the shooting of "casual drug user[s]" as part of his duty as a designated protector of city streets. Therefore, he presented this act of violence against Black people as a morally correct course of action in mitigating the threat of drugs. Ultimately, there is still much work to be done in unblurring this association between race and drug use in the United States in that drug criminalization continues to mass incarcerate large numbers of racialized individuals.

All in all, in calling a "war on drugs," the state blurred the fact that this "war" was directed toward racialized peoples, and thus rendered its racist motivations invisible. In doing so, it perpetuated covertly racist discourse among white Americans, such as that of the LAPD chief. Ultimately, this blurring of racism within the United States is dangerous because it convinces many white Americans that racism no longer exists there, and in this way erases many Black Americans' current experiences.

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[19] Murch, 554.
[20] Murch, 556.

Reflecting on the Multiplicity of Black Identities

Hall's article on Black popular culture highlights the importance of understanding Black identity as a complex and multitudinous concept, rather than as a single, unchanging entity (as it was and is often portrayed by whites). It also reveals the ways in which this multiplicity of Black identities was not always represented within Black popular culture. Ultimately, most, if not all, Black identities have been misrepresented in western societies, both within and outside of Black communities.

Firstly, in his discussion of the "logic of coupling," Hall recognizes the multiplicity of Black identities.[21] Specifically, he argues that it is important for Black people to identify as more than just Black because Blackness does not encapsulate all aspects of their identities. For example, pulling from Paul Gilroy's work, he maintains that "…blacks in the British diaspora must, at this historical moment, refuse the binary black or British" and that "You can be black *and* British… because even those two terms…do not exhaust all of our identities".[22] It is worth noting that race and nationality are not mutually exclusive in that they constitute different parts of a person's identity. The mere fact that this multiplicity of Black identities needed (and still needs) teaching reveals the extent to which these identities have been oversimplified through the course of history. Contrastingly, white people have been represented as complex and multifaceted beings within different media forms, such as film, literature, and news stories. Ultimately, the inability to accurately depict Black identities, as well as the tendency to present Black people through tropes, existed because most producers of popular, western media stories were white. In assigning Black people to oversimplified categories, white producers attempted to create a Black identity that they

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[21] Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," *Social Justice* 20, no. ½ (51-52) (1993): 111, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735.
[22] Hall, 111.

could understand. Furthermore, in presenting Black people in this way, these producers assumed that the consumer was white, and thus that they too needed an oversimplified version of Black identities.

Moreover, Hall argues that Black popular culture did not represent all Black identities, in that much of it was dominated by cis-gendered, heterosexual men. For example, he claims that "certain ways in which black men continue to live out their counter-identities as black masculinities…in the theaters of popular culture…claim visibility for their hardness only at the expense of the vulnerability of women and the feminization of gay black men".[23] Ultimately, this glorification of toxic masculinity, which is often associated with notions of misogyny and homophobia, within "the theaters of popular culture" overshadowed the experiences of Black women and gay Black men. Furthermore, in presenting heterosexual Black men as agents within this sentence (i.e., "black men continue to live out…"), Hall suggests that they were more able to present themselves in the ways in which they wanted (or rather had less barriers preventing their doing so) than people of intersecting Black identities. In other words, in "claim[ing] visibility," they left little room for Black women and gay Black men, among others, to express themselves in the ways in which they felt comfortable. Therefore, while Black popular culture offered, and still offers, important insight into the notion of Black identity, it is also important to consider the ways in which it sometimes failed to represent people of intersecting Black identities.

All in all, Hall reveals the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of Black identities both outside of and within Black communities, in that the former tended to oversimplify these identities while the latter often only accounted for a select few. Ultimately, this issue of

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[23] Hall, 112.

representation remains significant in that western societies have yet to create spaces for people of

different Black identities to present themselves in the ways in which they choose.

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