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RÉFÉRENCE


1 Anna Hartnell’s good knowledge of black political and religious discourse, dating from slavery to the present post-9/11 and post-Katrina America, grants her the confidence to draw parallels and to highlight the dividing lines that connect the political speeches of the most eminent African American politicians and thinkers in the history of the American nation. In an effort to map the Exodus rhetoric in the 20th and the early 21st century, the book explores the biblical Exodus text as it has been appropriated by African American from W. E. B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Toni Morrison and to U.S. President Barack Obama.

2 The story of the Jewish people out of ancient Egypt and towards the land of Canaan has worked as an allegory, expressing the nation’s struggle for freedom initially from religious persecutions and from the rule of the British Empire and later from slavery. The book studies the different renditions of the Exodus story that have shaped and voiced the black nation’s dreams for freedom and for return to their roots, often leading to black nationalism – as juxtaposed to white American nationalism – by arming the oppressed with power and agency. Additionally, Hartnell elaborately sketches how America has often turned from the land of freedom to the site of Egyptian oppression while Egypt, transformed into the land of Canaan, has posed as the realization of their dream for freedom. Although the myth has always expressed a promise for redemption from America’s violent past, very soon its complexity is revealed to the reader.
In tracing the interconnections between the different political and religious ideologies, Hartnell counts a lot on the exploration of Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness,” which runs through the book and which has expressed the unresolved “tension between ‘blackness’ and ‘Americanness’” (226). The book explores its different manifestations each time it meets with the political and religious speech of the African American thinkers of a particular era. The investigation commences with Obama, whose presidency constitutes the perfect example of “double consciousness,” revealed through the tensions his politics create between “black memory” and “state memory” (7). His mixed national white and black heritage as a black (connected to a post-colonial rather than a post-slavery black identity) as well as his religious cross-overs (as a Muslim who converted to Christianity and then rejected his church membership) also testify to his “double consciousness.” By avoiding racial issues and sticking to state politics while at the same time biding for an African American identity that would win him votes, Obama becomes the symbol of a ‘promised land’ (22).

Chapter 1 attempts an examination of Obama’s version of the Exodus narrative, which oscillates between the narrative of redemption and the post-colonial legacy of the African American and the Civil Rights Movement. Hartnell does not fail to pinpoint the similarities between Obama’s and Bush’s inauguration speeches that re-tell the exodus narrative, this time stressing American exceptionalism through the role America has to play as a chosen nation, while, at other times, the echoes of King’s speech in Obama’s discourse are evidence of African American exceptionalism. What is more, Obama’s identification with all underprivileged people of the world – showing his influence from Malcolm X’s Pan-Africanism – while, at the same time, stressing the work that still needs to be done, reveals the complexity of Obama’s exceptionalism and of the ideals that he has come to stand for.

All in all, by drawing our attention to Obama’s affinities with African, Muslim and Jewish diasporas in tandem with his American nationalism in a post-9/11 world, Hartnell makes a point about Obama as the president not of “a post-racial” world but of “a post-American world” (49). With new geopolitical relations arising from the East and with China as the next superpower, Obama’s political maneuvers and his post-modernist take on politics, displaying a rhetoric that can transcend place and time and his using and abusing of established traditions and narratives, make up the portrait of a timid post-modern post-American president, embracing all races, all nations and all religions under the umbrella of an American nation that still seeks its identity and tests its limitations within the changing world order. As Obama’s vision manifests affinities with all preceding black thinkers, the analysis of his speech could have followed post-9/11 and post-Katrina versions of the Exodus narrative in the concluding section of the book. However, Hartnell’s choice to structure the chapters in her book in a circular fashion, starting from Obama’s inauguration and ending with post-Katrina renditions of the story, emphasize the circular rather than the linear development of the Exodus narrative over the centuries.

Although Obama’s political speech tries to transcend the dividing line of race, it still shares a lot with Du Bois, for whom race distinction had been central in the formation of his doctrines. In Chapter 2, Du Bois poses as a different type of transnational thinker who envisioned the inclusion of the black minority into a transfigured American nation. Much of Hartnell’s analysis is based on Du Bois’ seminal work *The Souls of the Black Folk* (1903), in which the American South poses as a biblical landscape, while he is seen as the “prophet
seeking to transform the wilderness into a lost Zion” (69). Du Bois sees the African American Exodus narrative as a journey to the soul’s higher truth and self-awareness (78) while Exodus leads not to heaven but to death. He employs the myth to express his black nationalism even if that meant converting to Islam. Although his religious thinking inspires his national dream, a gradual break from Christianity is marked. As Hartnell quotes, “the dream of Abolition” becomes “a religion to the black world” (87).

Du Bois’ “double consciousness,” which works as the backbone of this study, is a psychological and spiritual condition in which the oppressed black identifies as both African and American. However, since the inclusion of the latter identity presupposes the exclusion of the former, it becomes a condition of constant otherness, standing either at the position of the “slave” or of the “master” and looking at the self from the position of the “other” (68). What is extremely essential in his rhetoric, though, is that the “slave” is granted with agency and does not identify merely with the oppressed. In contrast to Obama’s reconciliatory vision, Du Bois rejects the state merging with Christianity since he sees it as “unholy alliance” between religion and racism (70). Instead, by attaching to the black race a special mission, “a telos,” and by distancing it from the white religious supremacy supported by the West, he has laid the foundation for the Pan-Africanist movement (75). In hindsight, it turns out that his appropriation of the Exodus myth becomes a narrative that breeds black exceptionalism while it had initially been employed to target white American nationalism.

By contrast, King’s “double-consciousness” is founded once again on Christianity. His cries for one race of man able to share all privileges pervade his vision of racial transcendence. In his dream of integration, the messianic role of black Americans is stressed. The social character of the movement is emphasized in his religious thinking and his speech is influenced by black theology, insisting on social justice, in contrast to the white churches in the South. His rendition of the Exodus text is an allegory of the Civil Rights Movement, which is the road towards black freedom. In contrast to Du Bois’ Pan-African tendencies but in line with Obama’s former church (101-3), his version of the Hebrew text follows the traditions of the “West,” sustaining, thus, his black-Jewish alliance. Central in his theology is the image of Christ not as black – in Marcus Garvey’s fashion – or as white but rather as a Jew striving for divinity. Jesus’ humanization expresses the hope that humanity can follow his example and survive death (110) while his resurrection is a metaphor for the survival of the spirit. Christ’s resurrection is not offered to man as the redemptive power of history but rather expresses the need to “excavate” the guilty history of the white American nation, reminding one of Obama’s insistence on “unfinished history” and social change (101). Unfortunately, the failure of his dreams to materialize explains his desire for a break from a violent and murderous history. Hartnell interestingly points out that the “double consciousness” of the black is once again evident in King, who based his non-violence rhetoric on the capacity of humanity to perform violence. This non-violence political movement urged him towards transnationalism, away from the American system and towards his disillusionment.

Next in the analysis comes Malcolm, who translated King’s “American Dream” into an American Nightmare. The writer traces the way which led to Malcolm’s affiliation with African and Muslim diasporas and caused a break with the Jewish alliance. Feeling let down by Christianity – in a similar fashion to Dubois and King – he favored Pan-African post-colonial politics and religion. His civil religion expressed great hostility towards Jesus and white Christianity while for him the Exodus text posed as “the site of
oppression” (133). For Malcolm, the reclamation of Egypt was his alternative to the “Exodus” of the racist West and he struggled for an African Islamic Egypt. Malcolm was very much influenced by Marcus Garvey, the founder of the “Back-to-Africa” movement in the 1920s, for whom Jesus was black and the only solution to black oppression was the founding of an African nation. Malcolm uses the master/slave dialectic like Du Bois had done but distances himself by having the blacks identify with the Egyptian masters rather than with the Jews. His “double consciousness” is also evident in his political choices when, despite his former “white devils” thesis (134), he shows willingness to cooperate with the white racist organization of Ku Klux Klan. Although he rejected US exceptionalism, it was his Pan-Africanism which advocated black supremacy over the whites. Hartnell reminds the reader how critique coming from blacks against American imperialist plans made Malcolm’s critique once again up-to-date in a post-9/11 America.

10 At this point, Hartnell chooses Toni Morrison’s novel Paradise (1998) to act as a commentary on the previous exploration of black American identity, enunciated through religious and political speech. As an antidote to previous expressions of masculine authority and African American exceptionalism – reacting to White American exceptionalism – Paradise not only sketches the problematic tensions between religion and race but also makes a point about the deficiency of human nature as a whole. By drawing parallels to the Hebrew exodus out of Egypt, Morrison’s version of the Exodus text takes the form of a story of national founding of the all black community of Ruby. What seems to have been lacking all along from the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power is insinuated as the cause for self-destruction of its people. The novel, which works as a critique of the present African American middle class and the prosperity gospel, also draws our attention towards violence and the instances of misogyny that religion breeds. In Morrison’s account, redemption comes from female nature, acting as the other in a patriarchal society where evil derives from male violence and rationality. Her version of a transfigured Christianity is inspired by West African spirituality and implemented with magical elements (175). “Paradise, ultimately, denies its protagonists their dream of freedom as self-mastery and invokes instead Moses’ dying glimpse of the promised land” (192). Although it “dramatizes the violence that ensues from faith in a God that prohibits multiplicity”, Morrison’s misogynist reading of the book of Genesis proposes exile from the Garden of Eden as a precondition for survival (193).

11 Finally, “Conclusion: Exodus and Return in a Post-Katrina New Orleans” constitutes the most recent version of the Hebrew story, awakening memories and reminding one of the failures of the 1960s freedom movements. In a way, the project of rebuilding New Orleans, on which Obama founded his pre-election political campaign, works as an allegory. Although it suggested the redemptive potential in the African American history, Obama’s failure to take decisive steps to prevent color-sensitive poverty hints on the “forgetfulness” of the American nation (235).

12 This book successfully traces the diverse ways in which religious traditions and the Exodus narrative have converged with political speech to express the struggles of black Americans and to offer outlet for and understanding of their plight. All representative thinkers dealt with here, in their constant process of transformation and re-adjustment to unstable political events, have displayed an inevitable tendency towards Du Bois’ “double consciousness,” trying to see themselves through the eyes of the other, when faced with diverse political, racial and religious thinking. Inherent to the problem of forming a coherent African American identity is the difficulty to identify with a
geopolitical space as a place of origin. Moving from U.S. space to Africa and to Islamic Egypt, they have tried to find their place in history. The tensions arising from their negotiations with a racial and a religious identity have always led to their subsequent failure to reconcile an innocent past with a suspect present or future, moving them from a romanticized vision of black supremacy to the nightmarish realization of not being able to belong. By emphasizing the circular movement of sociopolitical situations and religious doctrines, informed by thinkers and traditions of the past, Hartnell manages to stress the always updated nature of the black national problem. Avoiding overt critique while investigating political and religious maneuvers, is Hartnell’s way of transcending issues of color and religion and of arousing the consciousness of people.

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