

A book profile of Anna Hartnell, *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from Du Bois to Obama*. London: Pluto Press, 2011. Vii + 240 pp. \$100 (cloth); \$35 (paper). ISBN: 074532956X.

**A**nna Hartnell's *Rewriting Exodus* is nothing short of a deeply engaging, thought provoking assessment of Obama's first term in office via the lens of African American religion. Throughout the book's five chapters, profiling Obama, Du Bois, King, Malcolm X, and Toni Morrison, Hartnell takes the occasion of the end of Obama's first term in office to provide a sweeping analysis of African American religion's relationship to American society. Specifically, Hartnell chooses the Exodus narrative as emblematic of the dialectical tension present in the African American political and social experience between being released from captivity and subsequent event of being "chosen" by God and thus eventually taking up the role of nation-state. In Obama's context, this is the tension between the "black memory" that shaped him and helped win him the presidency and the "state memory" of which Obama is now necessarily a mouthpiece. In both cases, experience of oppression is "haunted by the possibility of assuming oppression's mantle" (4).

In her first chapter on Obama, Hartnell sets out to show how Obama's relationship to the Exodus narrative has shaped his rhetorical output and self-understanding. As the inheritor of an explicitly exceptionalist dream, Hartnell argues that Obama has struggled to transform this inheritance into a postcolonial narrative (27). While Obama's identity has been shaped through his identification with the oppressed, including formative years community organizing and at Trinity Church in Chicago, he remains "essentially a liberal version of America" in that he genuinely believes that America already contains the resources by which it might redeem itself (35). One of the ways this shift manifests is in Obama's frequent emphasis of "equality" over the rhetoric of individual "liberty." This language of equality is rooted in the more radically democratic figure of Thomas Paine rather than the proponent of democracy rooted in traditional social hierarchy, John Adams.<sup>1</sup> Hartnell details explicit failures of Obama to assume the role of African American jeremiad, such as his administration's boycott of the 2009 UN conference on racism, where the issue of reparations might have been seriously discussed. Hartnell suggests that this example is a stark reminder that a head of state is simply never the best opposition to the state (62). While Obama may well have taken significant strides to emphasize his own grounding in "black memory," such a boycott might be seen as a sacrifice of this very memory at the alter of the state, or again, paradigmatic of the tension within the Exodus narrative between being liberated and founding a nation-state.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Radical Religion and American Democracy." *The Sleeping Giant Has Awoken: The New Politics of Religion in the United States*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins and Neal Magee. New York: Continuum, 2008. 16-18.

Though certainly not capricious, Hartnell only chooses a handful of African American figures that might be seen as exemplary of the Exodus tradition that sits with Obama in the Oval Office. In the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, Hartnell lifts up Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness" as a way of expressing the inherent tension of Exodus. Hartnell grounds and contrasts Du Bois with Hegel, showing that while double consciousness is akin to Hegel's "unhappy consciousness," Du Bois blatantly rejects any resolution Hegel proposes having to do with the merger of Christianity and the State. Rather, Du Bois takes up the role of jeremiad against state memory (70-1). Hartnell expands that Du Bois insists on "the dream of God to come (88), where unlike in Obama's reconciliatory liberalism, blacks in general and African Americans in particular are favored by God to make a new future. The possibility of dialectical reversal in the Exodus narrative is ever present in Du Bois' Hartnell insists, and with this multidimensional rendition of black religious-political identity in mind, Hartnell turns to Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

In contrast with Du Bois, King clearly focuses on the eventual integration of blacks and whites, while maintaining a messianic role for the African American people. Thus implied is King's privileging of the Exodus narrative over the figure of Jesus, symbolizing, according to Hartnell, the premature promise represented in the Christ figure (101). Hence, King's rendition of the Exodus narrative is more in line with Obama's in its faith in the resources of American democracy. Notably, Hartnell links King's Christology with that of not only black liberation theologian James Cone, but also cultural theorist Slavoj Zizek under the criterion of materialism. In this respect, King's Jesus is the Jewish Jesus of the Gospels, focused on material issues such as class division and poverty, but importantly without the invocation of the state either for the creation of movements like Pan-Africanism or traditional liberalism. Hartnell ends her section on King pondering whether Obama's election via multicultural alliance politics signals a fulfillment of King's domestic and foreign policy expectation. Given that this book is now over two years old, there is little discussion of Obama's foreign policy aggression in the form of lethal drone strikes. Hence the question of whether or not Obama fits the mold of King as a Nobel Peace Laureate (128) seems to have an ominous answer.

Turning to Malcolm X, the author highlights how Marcus Garvey's influence on Malcolm X led him to articulate the Exodus narrative as reclamation of Egypt in the wake of his perceived failure of the West and Christianity in particular. As Malcolm's involvement with the Nation of Islam increased (and even as it waned) his sense of black choosiness increased, a trait Hartnell links to the colonial cultural logic Malcolm himself fought against (139). Even while Malcolm's later phase in which he emphasized concepts such as "universal brotherhood" that he experienced on his *Hajj*, Malcolm remains a figure according to Hartnell who remains unable to "break away from the logic [he] is reacting to" (170). This is the subject of Hartnell's final figure, Toni Morrison, in her influential novel *Paradise* (1998).

Morrison is important not only as a figure that comments not simply on religion and race, but the human condition as a whole and also as someone who comes to

endorse Obama in 2008. Again, Hartnell draws a parallel with the work of Zizek in that *Paradise* sets out to “traverse the fantasy” of non-antagonistic society by underscoring necessary separation within society, in the novel represented by Sethe’s desire to reincorporate her daughter’s body into her womb (211). In her reflection on how to “imagine a home without simultaneously constructing a prison,” Morrison rejects utopianism in the rubble of the Bush years, the apparent failure of American democracy. Morrison complicates racial narratives by implying that there are “no pure origins to return to” (212), while parodying any sense of exceptionalism or romanticization of the past. *Paradise* “denies its protagonists their dream of freedom as self-mastery and instead invokes Moses’ dying glimpse of the Promised Land” (192). In this sense, Morrison thinking of “home without prison” is such that origins or paradise are not mourned, but the lack that engenders survival (193). Morrison’s reading of Genesis lauds Eve for transgressing paradise, for introducing multiplicity into a violent divine insistence of uniformity. Likewise, “bodacious black bodies” of black Eves might be the site of redemption in their deconstruction of violent fictions, or as Hartnell borrows from Jean-Luc Nancy, their personification of “myth interrupted” (193).

Hartnell brings her audacious narrative full circle by ending her account reflecting on the events following Hurricane Katrina. It is here that the book ends on a somewhat pessimistic note, pointing out that Obama essentially failed in delivering on the promises of a race sensitive reconstruction of New Orleans, again compromising black memory in favor of the state. While the inheritor of the critical black Exodus tradition, Obama himself might be said to encapsulate the profound tension he sees in the American tradition. While Obama is optimistic that America contains within it the reserves by which it might redeem itself from its murderous past, Hartnell implies that Obama too is conflicted in his role as reservoir for the black jeremiad tradition whilst perpetuating imperialism and exceptionalism (238). Though Hartnell claims that Obama stands for nothing if not the compatibility of blackness and being American, Hartnell’s account accentuates the conflict between these identities. Hartnell’s book offers the invaluable service of returning to the black prophetic tradition in order to think conflicts that those in power, no less Obama, are too often quick to superficially harmonize.

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