

Kennetta Hammond Perry

Black Futures Not Yet Lost: Imagining Black British Abolitionism

Nearly a year before images of George Floyd's murder galvanized a wave of Black Lives Matter protests around the world, the parents of fifteen-year-old Tashaûn Aird received tragic news of their son's death on May 1, 2019. Earlier that day, he told his mother he planned to meet friends at a local east London park and return before 9 p.m. But Tashaûn never made it back home. Instead, as he sat with friends, he was targeted in a fatal knife attack that he managed to escape before collapsing in the street near Somerford Gardens in Hackney as a result of multiple stab wounds. Police arrested four teenagers in connection with the death of Tashaûn Aird, and a jury convicted three of the four teens on a series of charges including murder and manslaughter after one of the defendants died in police custody while awaiting trial. However, for Tashaûn's family, the injustice of his death began well before he encountered four attackers in a Hackney park. From their view, the tragedy of his death was precipitated by events occurring in Tashaûn's life at least two years earlier when he received a permanent exclusion from school (Berg 2020; Burford 2021).

In July 2017, school authorities at Hackney New School issued Tashaûn Aird a five-day

suspension for his alleged involvement in a prank that resulted in damage to a teacher's coat. Shortly thereafter, school governors escalated the sanction to a permanent exclusion, a decision that his parents appealed to no avail and that local council authorities later determined to be unlawful. Following the permanent exclusion, local authorities assigned him a place in an alternative school, a provision designed for students prevented from attending mainstream schools. According to Tashaûn's father, the exclusion was the genesis of his transition from student to murder victim as his son was placed in an unsupportive environment with little academic stimulation and a lack of effective safeguarding practices. In the year following the convictions of the teenagers charged in Tashaûn Aird's death, the City and Hackney Safeguarding Partnership issued a report following an investigation into failings of social welfare agencies involved in Tashaûn's life that echoed sentiments expressed by his parents regarding the wider context that set the stage for their son's death. The report concluded that the illegal permanent exclusion served as a pivotal "catalyst" which then placed him in an "unstructured environment" that held low-to-no expectations of him and effectively made him vulnerable to exploitation and harm (Berg 2020; Burford 2021).

Eradicating this practice is a core pillar of the grassroots campaign No More Exclusions (NME), a self-described "Black led, Black feminist, abolitionist grassroots coalition" comprised of teachers, community activists, academics, faith leaders, social workers, parents, and students based in cities across England working to end all forms of school exclusions and "segregated education" (No More Exclusions n.d.). Founded in 2018, NME's focus on school exclusions reflects longstanding Black political agendas in the UK that have foregrounded education as a primary battleground for anti-racist organizing. Writing four decades ago in the groundbreaking collection *The Empire Strikes Back*, in ways that anticipated some of the core principles driving NME's work, Hazel Carby explained that as part of a wider politics of Black resistance to the conditions of racial capitalism in Britain, historically "Black communities have been engaged in a struggle to redefine what constitutes education and have condemned the consequences of schooling in Britain for Black students" (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982: 183). Just as Carby and her compatriots saw critical links between state racism operating in and across multiple social domains in the 1970s and early 1980s and the conditions of Black life, against the backdrop of COVID-19 and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement's public visibility during the summer of 2020, NME sought to broaden the frame of anti-racist critique to highlight the British education system's complicity in practices of

racialized governance that, alongside police encounters, subjected Black lives like Tashaun Aird to harm and premature death (Gilmore 2007).

In the wake of months of school closures and lockdown measures preventing most face-to-face learning during 2020, NME intensified its campaign to end school exclusions, urging the government to enact an immediate moratorium in the context of a pandemic which they found sanctioned new punitive regimes for which exclusions were applied, including the ill-defined transgression “failure to follow COVID rules” (No More Exclusions 2021). In their submission to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, a widely disparaged exercise in performative governance (Ding 2020) convened as part of the UK government’s response to the BLM demonstrations of 2020, NME articulated an abolitionist vision rooted in reimagining schools’ social function as a disciplining space. No doubt well aware of the nexus between the policing technologies of violence and control employed in schools and the racialized processes of criminalization that continue to produce an overrepresentation of Black lives in carceral institutions in the UK, NME’s calls for the abolition of school exclusions was in fact a prerequisite for a radical rethinking of fundamental approaches to building educational environments that prioritize responding to “unmet needs” as opposed to managing conduct (No More Exclusions 2020). Much like calls to defund or abolish the police, their abolitionist framework took a historical view of the object of abolition (Moten and Harney 2013) that accounted for the “anti-Black foundations” of the British education system and included a wholesale retooling of the driving ethos and purpose of public education that raised questions about how British schools, and ultimately British society, might be fundamentally remade in the service of a type of educational experience that enabled liberatory Black futures. What could a schooling environment look like that rejected punitive forms of correction, valued all forms of student expression, and remained accountable to addressing that which positioned members of a community to be more vulnerable to distress, harm, violence, or insufficiency? What new pedagogies would it require of those entrusted to educate? What types of alternative curricula would it necessitate and what new forms of engagement with marginalized communities would it demand? In raising these questions and speculating on the radical prospects of undoing a world that made exclusions possible, NME articulated a compelling vision of Black British abolitionism that posited abolition as a means and not *the* end, as a project bound up in the present, reckoning with the past, but oriented toward the fate of Black lives in a future that was both necessary and possible.

This essay explores how the convergence of a global public health crisis and historic Black Lives Matter mass protests around the world during the summer of 2020 provide a critical aperture to reflect upon the limits and possibilities of discourses of abolitionism in Britain past and present. More specifically it outlines some of the through lines that mark distinctive currents of Black abolitionist praxis in Britain that have worked to unsettle and uproot some of the historical narratives that have been enlisted to legitimate white sovereignty as a governing order (Hesse 2017: 591–92), deny the persistence of post-slavery colonial racial violence, and usurp possibilities for forging Black futures liberated from the conscripts of what Joel Olson has described as the problem of white democracy (Olsen 2004). In particular, I want to focus on how Black British abolitionist praxis confronts and counters reveries of abolition construed by a white British imaginary. White abolitionist fantasies contained deep-seated emotional and political investments in the active forgetting and misremembering of the racial logics and regimes of violence that enabled enslavement and compromised the unfinished potentialities of Black freedom for the purpose of preserving the national fiction of abolition as a glorious achievement enclosed in time past (Hall and Schwarz 2017: 77). Proliferating in different forms since the early nineteenth century, these narratives—instantiated through what Cedric Robinson previously described as “bourgeois historiography”—cast an imagined white liberal British nation as architect and agent of an anti-slavery movement and emancipation project that ostensibly secured liberty through a combination of appeals to humanitarian sentiment, metropolitan-based mass mobilization, and Parliamentary action (Robinson 1987). Subsequently, these abolitionist tales often vindicated postemancipation imperial pursuits in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean and disassociated the process of ending a system of racial slavery from one that sought the eradication of the violent and violating racial calculus that produced the life and death-making worlds of the enslaved and their progeny (Hartman 1997; Carby 2019).

In 2007, as the Blair government remained steeped in managing public perceptions of Britain’s role in the Iraq War, bicentennial celebrations commemorating the 1807 act to abolish the transatlantic slave trade provide a more recent inflection point to witness the political workings of these scripts of British abolitionism. In assessing the moment, Diana Paton (2009: 279) has insisted that these more contemporary discourses of British abolitionism reinforced “a narrative of white British self-congratulation and pride” that even managed to subsume insurgent abolitionist pursuits of the enslaved into its fold to further mythologies that ultimately heralded

the humanitarian accomplishments of a white nation on behalf of its Black subjects. But the versions of liberty proffered by what can be thought of as white British abolitionism were, from their inception, narrowly conceived, under-resourced, insufficient, and fundamentally committed to reconstituting and enhancing racial capitalism's reach through necropolitical rule predicated on violence, extraction, dispossession, and forgetting (Manjapra 2019). Furthermore, they were constituted through the foreclosing of Black political thought (Hesse 2014) and an avid disavowal of the predicament of post-abolition Black life and its strivings for freedoms that transgressed the legal structures of what Saidiya Hartman (1997: 115–19) terms as a “travestied emancipation” conjured within the limits of a “liberal imagination of freedom.”

What might be termed white British abolitionism then employs purposely abridged histories of an enslaving empire as a means to preserve the fiction of abolition-as-past to shore up distorted images of a progressive and anti-slavery nation (Huzzey 2012) through a willful denial and erasure of racialized colonial violence. Yet, protests emerging during the summer of 2020 affirming the intrinsic value of Black lives have thrown into sharp focus the limits of white British abolitionist thought—its faulty premises, its incompleteness, its failure to end or to make “past” the structures and force of white sovereignty which has endured well beyond chattel slavery. Given that our current conjuncture (Hall 1979) is marked by the rearticulation of abolitionist discourse to make legible the conditions of Black life past, present, and future as seen through the work of organizations like No More Exclusions, it is important that our contemporary analyses of Black politics account for a history of Black abolitionist praxis responsive to the colonial racial foreclosures (Hesse 2014) specific to the dynamics of British imperial practice. This essay tracks some of those currents to highlight Black British abolitionism's concern with countering the production and political work of abolitionist histories that render the time of abolition as past, as something already achieved by an imagined white nation. In doing so, we can observe how Black British abolitionist praxis calls into view what stands in slavery's wake (Sharpe 2016) to expose unrealized freedoms authored beyond the bounds of what British legal and political processes of emancipation could envisage. To be sure, this essay insists that what binds Black abolitionist praxis is the persistent refusal to sequester past and present, reframing the time of abolition as now, as a political orientation grounded in a racial present, tethered to an enslaving past, yet anticipating and actively building toward free Black futures not yet made possible.

White Mythologies, Black Abolitionism

In *The Long Emancipation*, Rinaldo Walcott argues that the present that we inhabit is marked by the persistence of an unfinished project of emancipation that has yet to deliver Black freedom. From Walcott's view, emancipation represents a juridical process that provided a legal framework for the *potential* of Black freedom; yet perhaps paradoxically, it functions to simultaneously interrupt, often to violent effect, the realization of a kind of Black freedom untethered to the racial logics of enslavement and coloniality (Walcott 2021). Building from a growing body of Black feminist scholarship that has theorized and historically situated the conditions, experience, and all-encompassing climate of anti-Blackness that marks the afterlife of slavery (Hartman 2007; Browne 2015; Sharpe 2016), Walcott employs "the long emancipation" as a conceptual device to articulate the predicament of unfreedom in the wake of emancipation, or that which exists suspended between slavery and a desired, yet elusive freedom. For Walcott (2021: 105), "the long emancipation does not simply suggest that Black people are still enslaved, rather it insists that Black people continually are prohibited and interdicted from authorizing what exactly freedom might look like and mean for them collectively." Writing from the vantage point of the twenty-first century but invoking ideas about the policing of Black life that are foundational to Black British cultural studies (Hall et al. 1978), Walcott sees these forms of prohibitions, interceptions, and obstructions as they manifest in such domains including but not limited to patrolling practices, surveillance technologies, border control enforcement, carceral institutions, and the quotidian regulation of Black movement, style, expression, and bodily autonomy. However, while Walcott makes a case for understanding the circumscription of Black freedom and its embodied consequences, there is a corollary argument to be made about what necessitates the perpetual superfluous policing of Blackness as a condition of slavery's afterlife. And here is where one can consider how enactments of "Black life politics," in the everyday and in the form of collective political struggle, persistently frustrate "the political constitution of whiteness as sovereignty," making room for prospects of Black freedom-making beyond the constraints of that which white authority sanctions or what it can even conceive (Hesse 2017: 601).

In many ways, Walcott's discussion of the long emancipation and its contemporary resonance is an extension of post-emancipation historical studies that have grappled with the limits of the statutory processes that made way for the end of slavery and its relationship to the practices of Black

freedom-making (Holt 1992; Sheller 2001; Lightfoot 2015). Taking Jamaica as a point of departure in the context of the British empire, writing nearly three decades earlier, Thomas Holt (1992) makes a compelling case for understanding how conjunctures in Caribbean history including the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion and working-class insurgencies of the 1930s were in fact indicative of the persistence of an unreconciled “problem of freedom” that was bound up with the terms of white abolitionist imaginaries held by a constellation of Parliamentarians, anti-slavery advocates, colonial authorities, and absentee planters who never anticipated an emancipation that would equate to or account for the demands and/or aspirations of Black freedom as viewed from the vantage point of the enslaved. Tracing the history of emancipation and its political consequences in both Britain and Jamaica, Holt carefully attends to forms of Black political struggle and vernacular practices of refusal including rejecting apprenticeship, fleeing the physical spaces of enslavement, creating market relations outside of the plantation economy, claiming abandoned lands, negotiating the terms of labor based on familial desires, and organizing collective revolt. In doing so, he both documents and employs a history of Black dissent and insurgency as a means to make legible the failings and inadequacies of emancipation by demarcating the tensions between what legal abolition’s architects prescribed and what Black freedom required.

Holt’s consideration of abolition’s profound failures, its discontents, its enduring incapacity to render or even further a project of Black freedom-making, stands in sharp contrast to the narratives of British abolitionism that came to shape widely held ideas about Britain as both global empire and nation beginning in the early nineteenth century. Just one year following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, Thomas Clarkson introduced one of the earliest narratives of British abolitionism portrayed as a liberal humanitarian triumph in a story that centered Britain as a beacon of progress and unrivaled pillar of moral fortitude that had rejected the scourge of slavery. Clarkson’s work set the intellectual parameters for what British abolitionism came to mean as part of a collective national memory well before the passage of the 1833 Act of Abolition and arguably into the twenty-first century (Huzzey 2012). His was a narrative of nation-molding that depicted true Britons—as embodied by propertied, white, male, evangelical protagonists including himself—as victors and change-agents endowed with the virtues and moral fortitude to overturn the status quo and champion the cause of anti-slavery on grounds that the institution was an offense against justice and humanity. From Clarkson’s vantage point—a view that remained

virtually uncontroverted for more than a century among an overwhelmingly white professional class of imperial historians—British abolitionism was a political story about a movement, its personalities, its impact, and its outcomes crafted to set the terms of remembering something that was achieved by the white masses and bequeathed to the enslaved. His story of abolition was one that had a clear denouement with a narrative that pivoted on building toward a preordained end that could be celebrated and revered as accomplished, completed, and certainly past. It was a captivating tale of good versus evil, saints prevailing over sinners, and winners and losers that entrenched itself into the collective consciousness as a source of national pride, an unassailable element of British history that then shored up the ideological rationale for what empire might become in the future (Hall 2011). Indeed, as Christopher Leslie Brown notes, nineteenth century narratives of British abolitionism—white mythologies masquerading as irrefutable history—would become foundational to the accumulation of the “moral capital” (Brown 2006) that subsidized the remaking of the image of the same empire that sanctioned slavery as a force for good in the Victorian age by offering benign tutelage to colonized subjects in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean regarded as not yet fit to exercise rights or self-determination (Goldberg 2002; Peterson 2010).

It was not until the publication of Eric Williams’s (1994) doctoral thesis, *Capitalism and Slavery*, that the historical record on British abolitionism received its most forceful challenge. For decades, the so-called Williams thesis has animated a host of scholarly debates about the relationship between the rise of industrial capitalism and the abolition of slavery in the British empire. Williams maintained that although the existence of slavery made way for industrial capitalism beginning in earnest in the eighteenth century, by the early nineteenth century the demands of industrial capitalism’s rapid expansion rendered slavery a less efficient means of production. Therefore, Williams insisted that the shifting political coalitions that facilitated Parliamentary action in favor of immediate abolition coalesced in the early 1830s because there was a vested economic incentive in slavery’s demise as the profitability of slavery in the Caribbean colonies stood in decline. Williams’s arguments are still widely debated and remain fundamental to interpreting the historical development of global capitalism and the demise of Atlantic slavery. Yet, one of the most damning underlying claims that he made about how British abolitionism should be remembered and historicized remains without substantive challenge. By interrogating the economic motivations that spurred British abolitionism and the terms by which it took shape, Williams

offered a blistering critique and reappraisal of the self-congratulatory narratives of humanitarianism and benevolence toward the enslaved that exploded myths of God-fearing, well-intentioned white British liberators acting as part of an abolitionist crusade designed to set the Black captives free. Moreover, writing as part of a broader anti-colonial and Black radical historical tradition that regarded history as a tool to interrogate and impeach the presumptions of Western liberal discourses of empire (Robinson 2020; Satia 2020), Williams (1994: 204) both laid bare and challenged a vision of white abolitionism that bestowed freedom as a “dispensation from above.” In fact, in ending his study of the demise of Caribbean slavery with attention to the abolitionist history that was made from below, writing on the heels of the publication of C. L. R. James’s (2001) insurgent history of the Haitian Revolution, not only did Williams (1994: 201) move the story from the metropolitan corridors of elite white patriarchal power to colonial sites of Black revolt and maroonage, but he also positioned the “studiously ignored” political imaginaries of the enslaved as integral to the study of emancipation’s unfolding.

Although the bulk of Williams’s text is preoccupied with charting the economic incentives precipitated by the rise of industrial capitalism that contributed to the collapse of plantation slavery in the British empire, throughout the text one is hard pressed not to notice his explicit debate with both the dominant historiography on British abolition and its practitioners. More specifically, on several occasions, Williams takes to task arguments presented by Oxford historian Reginald Coupland, who served as an external examiner for his dissertation and was one of the most highly regarded imperial historians of the early twentieth century. Similar to Du Bois’s treatment of William Dunning in *Black Reconstruction*, in the pages of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams enlists Coupland as an instructive synecdoche to frame a scathing critique of what had become an authoritative school of historical thought on white abolitionism. This white historical consensus essentially rendered abolition as the moral cause and humanitarian triumph of a nation that came with receipts of atonement calculated at £20 million. Never mind that the financial investments made in the project of emancipation provided an economic stimulus for slave owners that legally recognized them as aggrieved parties and made way for the extension of racialized violence and necropolitical rule through an arrangement that reproduced the idea of the enslaved as property in life and death that one could leverage to become a claimant for compensation (Manjapra 2019; Hall 2011).

Williams’s challenge to British imperial historiography was indeed part of a broader set of political and theoretical interventions that Cedric

Robinson (2020) has insisted constituted part of a radical Black historiography that concerned itself with understanding Black liberation—its strivings, its detractors, and its unfulfilled promises. And even though the enslaved do not necessarily feature as the “chief witness” (Du Bois 1992: 721) in Williams’s revisionist account of the confluence of factors that contributed to the demise of slavery in the British empire, he nonetheless opened up a critical space of inquiry within historical narratives of British abolitionism to consider aspirations of Black freedom that have been shaped within, against, and despite the limits of white abolitionist logics. One should note that Williams’s thesis was crafted against the backdrop of national commemorations of the centenary of the abolition of slavery in the British empire in 1933. And in contrast to the 2007 bicentenary commemorations of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, John Oldfield (2007) has observed that the 1933 centenary celebrations recounted stories of abolition that were largely dismissive of Black perspectives on abolition and in large measure only featured the enslaved as beneficiaries of white patronage. Yet, whereas white abolitionist narratives disregarded the intellectual posture of the enslaved in crafting an abolitionist agenda, Williams (1994: 201–2) insisted that “the slave was alert to his surroundings and keenly interested in discussions about his *fate*” and ostensibly what Black freedom might portend aside from and, in many instances, contrary to white abolitionist prescriptions. In the short final chapter, “The Slaves and Slavery,” which he only added when the manuscript was in the page proofs stage of publication, Williams signaled the existence of a Black abolitionist praxis mobilized by maroons of Jamaica, those inspired by the insurgents of San Domingue, and those who had rejected gradualism and amelioration in favor of what Ottobah Cugoano had memorialized in writing a generation prior in a demand for “total abolition” *now* (Caretta 1996: 170). And by featuring the desires of emancipation arising from the enslaved as part of a larger critique of consensus narratives of how an imagined white nation accounted for the end of slavery, Williams presented readers with the seeds of a counter-history of British abolitionism that was intimately concerned with reimaging the terms of abolition’s arrival, but also its function in engendering possibilities for securing Black future freedoms.

Black Abolitionism as Black Future

Part of the seduction of white British abolitionism rests in its investments in reinforcing linear temporalities of historical thought manufactured to demonstrate the moral progress and natural evolution of a liberal nation. As

a consequence, within this frame, constructing histories of abolition is predicated not only on marking the triumph over an objectionable enslaving past but also on sealing and containing that past in such a way that quarantines it from being relevant outside of its function as a pretext for producing an end to a story that has already been decided—one which has no epilogue or future editions. Essentially, white British abolitionism is mired in an act of colonial racial foreclosure (Hesse 2014) that both renders slavery as a past act of injustice remedied through abolition and actively resists a confrontation with the residual effects of the conditions of its existence. But whereas white British abolitionism considers the fate of the enslaved only in so much as it matters to produce a tidy and expedient tale about a moment of destiny in the progress of a nation, the excavation of a counter-history of Black abolitionism generates an alternative, heterochronic approach to history (Elias 2020) that unsettles the pastness of the enslaving past (Trouillot 1995). Moreover, it offers a means to consider not only what abolition might have accomplished, but also what it left undone, what it could not account for, and that which required remaking in its wake for Black freedoms to be lived, felt, practiced, and preserved.

In what remains an unparalleled socio-historical analysis of British society grounded in Black women's experiences, Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe's (1985) classic text *The Heart of the Race* makes a point of dismantling distinctions between past and present. Written against the backdrop of historic Black protests and rebellion occurring across a number of British cities, including Bristol, London, Liverpool, and Manchester, in the early 1980s, the book examines a number of themes in relation to Black women's lives including their position within the laboring economy, their encounters with health and welfare services, their engagement with the education system, and their modes of organizing and ways of affirming their cultural and political existence. *The Heart of the Race* stands as part of a canon of intellectual work focused on mapping the relationship between state power, culture, race, and racialization produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of which came out Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies led by Stuart Hall (Hall et al. 1978; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982), and other forms of critical political analysis published in the pages of radical organs, including *Race Today*, *Race and Class*, and *FOWAAD*, the newsletter of the national Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (Waters 2019; Field et al. 2019; Swaby 2014). In summarizing the book's purpose of documenting a history of Black women in Britain that was still in the making, the authors insisted that their

collective work, including the oral history archive of Black women's lives contained in the pages of the book, represented a front in an ongoing yet emergent Black freedom struggle. Accordingly, they asserted:

By living, countering and shaping a way of life for ourselves which involves constantly reassessing those racist definitions and challenging the negative ways society has conditioned us to see ourselves we are making a loud and positive affirmation about who we are. Through the choices we are making about our lives and the values which we are imparting to our children, we are making it clear that in whatever ways the society tries to constrain us, *we will break free*. (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe 1985: 238)

Adopting a grammar of “black feminist futurity,” one which Tina Campt (2017: 17) describes as envisioning that which must be while “striving for the future that you want to see, right now, in the present,” Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe foreground historical knowledge and the “power in the telling” of Black women's narratives as a necessary ingredient in the practice of freedom-making (Ono-George 2019). Their work offers a “rebellious history” that situates Black women's everyday experiences as axes to disrupt dominant narratives and expose the limits of liberal freedom (Noble 2016). In their desire to make legible histories that contravene “the British version” of stories of imperial glory that failed to account for how the “blood, sweat and tears of Black women and men” underwrote industrial capitalism, providing wealth from the spoils of plunder for a nation that they too had helped to build, echoing Eric Williams, the authors make clear that the struggles of Black women in Britain that they detail are rooted in a longstanding colonial relationship (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe 1985: 6–7). On the specific matter of abolition, they note that while the Abolition Act of 1833 allegedly “made slavery ‘utterly and forever abolished’ . . . this could not be the end of it. Colonialism took over where slavery left off” (10). In doing so, they invite readers to think beyond the institution of slavery as the object of their abolitionist imaginaries. Likewise, in stark contrast to white British abolitionist narratives which presented abolition as a *fait accompli*, they charge that much remained unaltered in the broader racial order that authorized and sustained slavery, as the “stranglehold” of the plantation economy endured under reconstituted social regimes that relied upon the continued exploitation, abuse, and control of Black labor and economic power (13). For Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, confronting the present consequences of this historical reality in such a way that contemplates Black abolitionist struggle beyond legal emancipation is, in their estimation, “fundamental to any grasp of our lives in Britain today” and vital to their political organizing (3).

Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe's framing of an unfinished Black abolitionist project that requires reckoning with disavowed histories and mobilizing in the present in the service of liberatory Black futures is precisely the type of political orientation that refuses disaggregating that which must end from that which must be birthed. As such, in the vein of Angela Davis's invocation of Du Bois's (1992) notion of abolition democracy, it attends to the historical conditions that must be negated, dismantled, and or annulled, while adamantly anticipating that which must be made anew as part of securing Black freedoms through speculative, creative, and improvisational future-oriented practices grounded in the now (Rodríguez 2019). In her reading of Du Bois, Davis (2004: 95–96) sees “comprehensive abolition” as a process invested in legally nullifying the institution of slavery, liberating Black people from the conditions that marked their enslavement and creating a new institutional infrastructure that would not only equip the formerly enslaved with economic means for survival, but also aid them in “fashion(ing) new free lives” that could only be livable in a radically transformed social order. In recent years, Davis's work has informed a bevy of groundbreaking abolitionist scholarship and political movement-building within the academy and among grassroots activists with a particular focus on carceral power (Benjamin 2019; Cullors 2019; Kaba 2021). Moreover, contemporary abolitionist discourse has opened up generative approaches to consider multiple and converging carceral geographies in and beyond brick-and-mortar sites of jails and prisons while offering a praxis of radical change-making that requires imaginative querying about what must become present if one envisions the eventual absence of irredeemable systems that produce and perpetuate harm and violence (Gilmore 2019).

Although not explicitly regarded as an abolitionist text, in *Freedom Dreams* Robin Kelley (2003) insists that there is much to be gained from the imaginative labor of dreaming in the now of worlds not yet possible as part of striving for futures yet unknown. Sketching the broad contours of a history of the Black radical imagination in the twentieth century, Kelley explores the movement-shaping transnational political work of Black diasporic intellectuals like Claudia Jones, C. L. R. James, and George Padmore, whose ideas were formed in the crucible of living and organizing in Britain. He makes a powerful case about the significance of drawing from earlier histories of renegade thinkers with dreams of free Black futures, not necessarily as an antidote for addressing our present, but rather as a model of how to practice freedom-making in our present, in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) calls the “meanwhile,” in anticipation of what is yet to come. In making this case, Kelley (2002: xii) insightfully notes, “Without new visions we

don't know what to build, only what to knock down." His observations draw attention to what freedom dreams enable and are a reminder of their capacity to hold insurgent Black abolitionist imaginaries which are persistently operating across and between different temporalities—past, present, and future—in the service of that which has not yet been rendered possible. So then, within the context and constraints of a world-recalibrating global pandemic, how might we look to the summer of 2020 as an aperture that allows us to see how Black activists, intellectuals, educators, creatives, and dreamers in Britain are continuing to reclaim and reshape abolitionist narratives that make legible the unrealized potential of emancipation to anticipate futures where Black freedoms are imagined not as perpetually lost or interdicted, but as yet to come?

Black Abolitionist Futures Now

One of the most dramatic images that has emerged from the wave of Black Lives Matter protests that occurred in cities around the globe in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder was the toppling of the bronze statue of Edward Colston in Bristol on June 7, 2020. In the immediate aftermath, Jen Reid, a local activist who had participated in the protests, recalled being moved at the sight of witnessing a "truly historical moment." In response, Reid climbed the plinth that had once held Colston's statue, describing him as wise and virtuous, and was photographed raising a clenched fist. Reid (2020) explained, "When I was stood there on the plinth, and raised my arm in a Black Power salute, it was totally spontaneous, I didn't even think about it. It was like an electrical charge of power was running through me. My immediate thoughts were for the enslaved people who died at the hands of Colston and to give them power. I wanted to give George Floyd power, I wanted to give power to Black people like me who have suffered injustices and inequality. A surge of power out to them all." Reid's response to the fall of Colston's statue was immortalized in a black resin statue titled *A Surge of Power-Jen Reid 2020*, designed in consultation with Reid by artist Marc Quinn. Quinn made arrangements for the life-size sculpture of Reid—a working-class Black woman styled with an Afro, clad in a beret, aspiring to empower in the pursuit of unfulfilled justice through an unapologetic gesture declaring that Black Lives Matter—to be installed in the same spot that had celebrated a slave trader for nearly 125 years. Reid's statue remained atop the same plinth that had previously held one of Edward Colston for only a day before being removed by local authorities. But its very existence represents a kind of Black abolitionist project that speaks to some of the ways

that Black activists in Britain continue to ponder what could become present by absenting, dismantling, divesting from, and literally toppling the vestiges of celebrated white mythologies of slavery and coloniality.

While the toppling of Colston's statue generated media-worthy optics that captured the attention of global audiences, it is important to underscore how battles over the reconfiguration of public space in the form of the removal of statutes had been integral to recent anti-racist organizing in Britain well before the BLM protests of 2020. More specifically, Colston's fall cannot be disaggregated from student-led activism like the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at Oxford (RMFO) and the Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA) movement, which resulted in a 137-day occupation of Deptford Town Hall during the spring of 2019 by students at Goldsmiths, University of London seeking commitments to and investments in altering the physical architectures and landscapes, marking the ongoing racialized coloniality of the university, and redressing institutional racism and anti-Blackness on campus and beyond. These campaigns formed part of a broader movement largely concentrated in UK higher education to decolonize the university, critique its structures, rethink its composition, and reimagine its purpose (Pimblott 2019). And they represent another chapter in a longer history of educational activism spurred by collectives both within and beyond the university, like the West African Students Union and the Black and Asian Studies Association invested in challenging the Eurocentric and colonial architecture of the British academy (Matera 2010)

While the language of decolonization has been co-opted, dehistoricized, and increasingly marketized as part of reformist institutional agendas across the UK higher education landscape in the last couple of years, student-led calls to decolonize remain steeped in a more radical political vision. Rejecting the conflation of decolonial work and the performative work of diversity agendas that Sara Ahmed (2012) notes undermine the process of naming and confronting the dynamics of racism, student-led campaigns have raised questions about the whiteness of the curriculum, the racial and ethnic composition of British academia, the limits of multiculturalism, the economic position of university service workers, and the terms of the university's existence as a source of knowledge production and a public resource for addressing social injustice. Moreover, they have been explicit in aligning their political positions with historic invocations of the term *decolonization* drawn from anti-colonial movements from earlier generations taking "colonialism, empire and racism" as objects of study and critique as they manifest within the context of the university with a view toward arriving at "alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political

praxis” (Bhambra et al. 2018: 2). But what happens when contested visions of decolonizing the university and the labor that they require no longer remain viable? What is the course of action for those who recognize the afterlives of slavery in the machinations and everyday life of the university when there is an insistence on decolonization in the absence of complete abolition? And to what extent can Black abolitionism’s concern with the visionary work of alternative future-building lend itself to initiating Black freedom dreams unleashed from geographies of coloniality inscribed in British higher education? These are just some of the questions that emanate from the UK-based Free Black University collective.

Spearheaded by Black doctoral students, early career scholars, and student activists; self-described as Afro-futurists; and led by queer scholar-activist Melz Owusu, the Free Black University collective emerged in earnest during the summer of 2020 and attracted social media attention from around the world as it raised well over one hundred thousand pounds through crowdfunding (Alibhai 2020). As part of their platform, the collective insisted on harnessing the creative, disruptive, and transformative power of “the radical Black imagination” as an indispensable tool for Black liberation. More specifically, their platform included building alternative spaces outside of the colonial architectures and borders of the public university that would reimagine “both the content and the terms of access and encounter for sites of knowledge and knowledge production” through the creation of venues for study, planning, and collaboration as well as channels for distributing educational resources and “radical knowledge” for and by Black thinkers and communities, freely available to mass audiences. Not only did they offer a model for rethinking pathways into education, but they also challenged the very concept of what constitutes a public university and the freeing possibilities of education (Free Black University 2020). Certainly, comparisons can be made between the Free Black University and the political work of US-based historically Black colleges and universities as spaces of refuge and rebellion providing what Jelani Favors (2019) describes as a “second curriculum” steeped in preparing Black students to challenge racism all while affirming Blackness. However, with an emphasis on providing community lectures, conferences, a virtual library, mental health resources, and publications through open access, the Free Black University is more akin to insurgent fugitive spaces of Black study like the Institute of the Black World founded in Atlanta by Vincent Harding in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.’s death, which brought together a diasporic cohort of Black intellectuals, activists, and political organizations fueled by King’s prescient and enduring question which yokes Black thought from the plantation to the present—Where do we go from

here? (White 2011). Moreover, the Free Black University also reflected community-based education models in Britain including the Black supplementary school movement and radical Black publishers and bookshops, founded by John LaRose and Jessica and Eric Huntley during the 1970s and 1980s, that generated auxiliary routes for engaging, distributing, and creating Black-centered knowledges (Andrews 2013; Waters 2019) outside of, in excess of, and contrary to the existence of what Hazel Carby (1982) termed the problem of “schooling in Babylon.” In this sense, in relation to Black abolitionist praxis it is useful to think of the creation of the Free Black University as a kind of “otherwise world” offering something else, a different mode of engagement, an alternative register of doing that does not function to replace or supplant, but to provide *an* other that can be activated now (King et al. 2020)

In articulating their vision for a Free Black University (2020), members of the collective acknowledged that the impetus for such a pursuit arose from their belief in the impossibility of redeeming the Western university, a site of containment regarded as “not fit for purpose when considering the decolonial agenda” that reproduced commodified knowledge systems and structures of harm that persistently affirm that “Black lives do not matter.” And as a form of abolishing the colonial dynamics of extraction and exploitation that defined their work as Black laborers in the university enlisted to perform anti-racist work within a defective framework of diversity and inclusion, members of the Free Black University advocate divestment from the market-driven imperatives of the so-called public university and a redistribution of resources in support of open-access programs that foreground “anti-colonial learning” rooted in an understanding of the “textured histories of Black folk across the world through a decolonial lens” (Free Black University 2020). In writing their story, they position themselves as both engaged with and constituting Black histories, which, they insist, are “always being created” and therefore not fixed in time. The visionaries driving this work maintain that their existence is predicated on being a conduit of “imagining Black radical futures, futures in which Black queer and trans folk are at the centre, futures in which we no longer have to speak about racism, futures in which tiredness and pain are not synonymous with the Black experience.” The work of the Free Black University and how it may fully materialize is no doubt still in the making. But it stands as a reminder that planning, speculating, and developing modalities of critical exchange and generative spaces to study, gather, create, plot, and strategize in ways that can inform our potential for knowing, naming, and envisioning that which is lacking to fertilize Black, freeing futures is vital and necessary work that is bound up in how we fashion histories of the present that continually unsettle the past.

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