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ANTIPODE

Shona N. Jackson, *Beyond Constraint: Middle/Passages of Blackness and Indigeneity in the Radical Tradition*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1918-3 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1654-0 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2381-4 (ebook)

What does it mean to read the Caribbean as a settler-colonial space? How should we understand the relationship between anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity in the region? And how are these themes reckoned with in the rich genealogy of the Black radical tradition? Shona N. Jackson's *Beyond Constraint: Middle/Passages of Blackness and Indigeneity in the Radical Tradition* tackles these and related questions by attending to radical Caribbean labour histories, inviting us to critically interrogate Marxist conceptions of labour in relation to formations of colonial and racial power.

Building on her previous work in *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (2012) and drawing from a wide variety of intellectual traditions and scholarly fields—ranging from settler-colonial and Indigenous studies to afropessimism, post-colonial and post-structural theory, as well as Black and Caribbean studies—Jackson's latest intervention makes for a conceptually dense read. Engaging with thinkers such as Cedric Robinson, Walter Rodney, C.L.R. James, and Sylvia Wynter, *Beyond Constraint* attends to the histories and figures that are excised from the radical tradition's account of colonial capitalism and the subversive forces it conjures.

As in her prior work, Jackson highlights the pervasive nature of the myth of Indigenous extinction within the radical tradition's historiographies of the region. Whether dealing with Eric Williams, C.L.R. James, or Walter Rodney's work, she emphasises the persistence of what Newton (2013) has called the narrative of "aboriginal absence". Indigenous peoples, the familiar story goes, were all but eliminated in the Columbian encounter and its aftermath, barely leaving a trace behind.

Not only does Jackson challenge the facticity of this narrative, but more importantly, she seeks to excavate the ontological premises on which it rests. These myths of wholesale erasure, she argues, rely upon a conceptual paradigm of labour that *delinks* Indigenous dispossession from black enslavement. Ever since Columbus' arrival on Caribbean shores and the notorious Valladolid debate between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, the Indigenous body has primarily been identified with the Lockean myth of

uncultivated land and as a repository of unproductive labour. The enslaved African, on the other hand, is made synonymous with the cultivating and productive work performed on plantations in the service of Capital and Empire (p.20, 43).

Jackson calls this bifurcation "Conversion", denoting the "historical phenomenon that institutes the labour-work dialectic" between Indigenous and black peoples (p.59). This dialectic, she argues, separates the labour of each group from their distinct yet overlapping processes of dispossession (p.46). Conversion also signals a reconfiguration of the Middle Passage. In reading these twinned processes together, she develops the "*middle/passages* as methodology", in attempting to unsettle dominant analytical approaches in Atlantic studies which, she argues, tend operate in static terms while marginalizing indigeneity (p.86-87; 92-101).

Thus, Jackson's approach calls for the recognition and embrace of relationality. She argues that labour histories and conceptual tools that treat anti-indigeneity and anti-blackness in isolation, or separate processes of dispossession from enslavement, franchise- from settler-colonialism, and so on, end up re-entrenching these divides, rather than moving beyond them (p.118). It's this *beyond*, that functions as the horizon toward which Jackson's work gestures.

The labour-work dialectic, she argues, is problematically reproduced by the radical tradition due to its indebtedness to Marx and Marxist thought. As a result, native and black lives are disarticulated from one another, generating and sustaining antagonisms which not only prohibits a deeper understanding of colonial capitalism, but also ultimately constrains the realisation of co-constitutive "struggles for freedom" (p.xvi). Indeed, Jackson's project of rethinking the radical tradition through its simultaneous closures and openings to indigeneity, is built on a forceful critique of Marxism, which leans especially on Hannah Arendt's reading of Marx in *The Human Condition*. It's here, I argue, where the book exhibits its most consequential shortcomings.

While at times gesturing toward the Fanonian notion of a "stretched Marxism" (p.14; Fanon 2001: 31), generally the book leans toward transcending the Marxist paradigm altogether. At various points, Jackson represents Marxism as a body of thought plagued by historical determinism, economic reductionism, universalism and crude materialism. However, in offering such a one-sided representation of an incredibly polyvalent tradition, Jackson's critique ends up generalising what would otherwise be a justified stance toward

some of Marxism's more vulgar forms of expression. This opposition to Marxism becomes even more evident when we attend to its Arendtian foundations.

Arendt's famous *vita activa* distinguishes between three autonomous modes of human activity: labour, work, and action. These are hierarchically organized and defined based on their ability to promote the flourishing of human freedom. For Arendt, labour is activity connected to the human condition of life; work denotes the condition of worldliness which provides an artificial and unnatural world of things; while action refers to the unique plurality of being through which humans come to reveal their identity and answer the question "who am I?" (Arendt 1998: 7; Tömmel and d'Entreves 2025). In this schema, only action is truly identifiable with freedom, as it is seen to express initiative—that is, "the [human] capacity of beginning something anew" (Arendt 1998: 9).

Jackson's conceptual intervention is based on Arendt's claim that Marx does not distinguish between work and labour, and that his account ends up equating "human nature with the natural and biological movements of" labourers (Holman 2011: 334). Labour in Marx, the argument here goes, refers solely to the products of the Arendtian notion of physical work performed under the crushing weight of capitalist production (p.50). This argument by Arendt and Jackson, however, reduces Marx's complex notion of labour "to an asocial, purely individual material interchange with nature", instead of recognizing it as a unity of abstract *and* concrete determinations that cannot be simply reduced to merely one of its many forms of expression (Starosta 2022: 127).

In Marx, Jackson argues, "the productive form of labour facilitating accumulation processes is…collapsed with and is read as *all* other forms of labour" (p.51, emphasis added). Jackson argues that this notion of labour becoming synonymous with its *alienated form* under capitalism—which refers to work in the Arendtian system—is reproduced by the radical tradition and its histories of labour, thus leaving little to no room for the acknowledgment of labour taking place *outside* the law of value.

While this misreading has its consequences for Jackson's broader conceptual apparatus, it does not ultimately undermine the central imperative of *Beyond Constraint*, namely, to offer a generative point of departure for rethinking the relationship between anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity in the Caribbean world. Moreover, the book is certainly correct to highlight that Marx and Marxist thought have generally fallen short in reckoning

with race, indigeneity, and the colonial question—both *in relation to* and *independently of* processes of capital accumulation and class struggle. Exploring the background conditions and constitutive outsides not only of the capital relation, but also of the plantation archipelago, remains a task that few scholars have grappled with as extensively as Jackson.

For these reasons, *Beyond Constraint* serves as an invaluable work of contemporary political and social theory attempting to bridge anti-colonial, Black radical, and Indigenous thought. Reading the radical tradition *against itself* to locate potential openings toward an alternative Caribbean labour history, Jackson engages in a creative practice of narration, theorization and history-writing—a practice that seeks to move, as the title suggests, beyond existing epistemic constraints.

More than a mere historiographical correction, the book reckons with the various forms of colonial and racial power that continue to shape the region today. These forms of power are imbued in the very structures of the post-colonial nation-state (p.264). To overcome such assemblages of power, *Beyond Constraint* forcefully argues that emancipatory political projects must move beyond the state while imagining "new possibilities" for the relational co-existence of Indigenous and Black sovereignties (p.294). In doing so, it constitutes a work seriously committed to envisioning and enacting alternative modes of social life amid the crises of the present conjuncture.

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