

*Research Africa Reviews* Vol. 8 No. 1, April 2024

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Nathalie Etoke, *Black Existential Freedom*. Publisher: Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. Pp. 157. ISBN: 9781538157060 (cloth) | ISBN 9781538173060 (paperback) | ISBN 9781538157084 (epub).

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*Black Existential Freedom* is a refreshing book in the midst of the deluge of Western mainstream reportage of the trope of trauma, diseases, poverty, and death that have become synonymous with the Africana world. This reportage is coupled with the range of academic analyses that fail to see how black America and the African diaspora could escape the taint of blackness. Not even Black Panther, Wakanda Forever, and the Afrofuturistic call for rethinking this trope could become redemptive enough. The Africana world has been struggling with the burden of blackness from slavery till Afro-pessimism. *Black Existential Freedom* is refreshing first because it tackles Africana existentialism from the perspective of Africana cultural production that takes aesthetic and artistic creativity seriously. This is unlike the pure theoretical and philosophical engagement with and articulation of being and nonbeing that populate most studies of existential matters. It is also refreshing because it offers a glimpse into the possibility of liberatory politics outside the framework of ontological and social death that make Afro-pessimism a philosophy too gloomy to offer a way out for blackness and black existence in the United States.

*Black Existential Freedom* is a combative and redemptive study. Its first take-off point is the rejection of the disabling philosophical and political discourses on blackness and black existence, especially Afro-pessimism, that preclude the possibilities of breaking out of the dungeon of existential despair created by slavery, colonialism, racism, and white supremacy agitation. This also demands giving the discursive knock down to the black humanist discourses of Edouard Glissant, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and Paul Gilroy, especially how their discourses are mediated by what Etoke calls "the impassable horizon of epistemic double consciousness: simultaneously responding to and challenging the Western definition of the human, which dehumanizes people of African descent" (3). For her, even though being black is a "complex existential and political situation that is inherently tied to transatlantic slave trade, slavery, colonization, and postcolonization,"

blackness must be actively interrogated as a concept that transcends victimhood into the very conceptual signifier of the possibility of existential struggle to emancipate black humanity. As Frantz Fanon argued, there is always space for inventiveness that allows for the possibility of the reinvention of humanity. And Natalie Etoke takes this possibility as the condition for theorizing blackness as "a never-ending commitment to individual and collective freedom" demonstrated through the (re)mediation of what it means to be human in black cultural productions. In this sense, it constitutes one of the most robust and enlivening rejections of Afro-pessimism and its philosophy of ontological and social death in the Africana world. Etoke's reconstructive thesis is based on what she calls Neg humanness.

Derived from the Haitian Creole word for human (Neg), this theoretical framework "rejects the received construction of race as an unchosen dehumanizing identity" and rather focuses on unraveling the understanding of humanness or "the condition of being human from the perspective of the oppressed" (3). We can therefore begin to outline the premise of the overall argument. Blackness constitutes the humanity of black people before the severe attempts at dehumanization through slavery, colonization, and protracted anti-blackness. And with these traumatic existential experiences, the challenge is to keep reinventing that humanness within that combustible site of struggle for emancipation (4). *Black Existential Freedom* therefore interrogates those cultural expressions that engage with existential attempts to dehumanize and hence negate black existence.

And this critical engagement of creative expression is articulated from a brilliant transdisciplinary framework that allows for a broad perspective of what blackness signifies. Divided into three parts of eight chapters, *Black Existential Freedom* draws on film (chapter one), music (chapter two), disaster as a creative force (chapter three), citizenship and racism (chapter four), short stories (chapter five), spoken word performances (chapter six), documentaries (chapter seven), and primary sources and more documentaries (chapter eight). All the chapters coalesce around sexual identity, subjectivity and subjectification, activism, existential and spiritual experiences, the traumas and paradoxes of citizenship and community, the relationship between memory and racism. The coda situates the George Floyd racial incident and black scholarship within the wider context of neoliberal space and its (in)capacity to facilitate conversation. Black liberation politics is key to the overall objective of *Black Existential Freedom*. However, we immediately confront an inherent tension in terms of how individual and collective freedom is to be achieved,

given that the book takes a decidedly individual path in the analysis of artistic and cultural expressions. This tension is followed inherently by the query of how distinctly political cultural expressions can be, especially when they project an individual's political vision and expression of politics. How, in other words, is black liberationist politics to be understood from contradictory and incoherent individual perspectives and ideological differences and shifts? For instance, we have the difference between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. At what point and in what ways could these cultural and artistic expressions be cumulated as a vivid and coherent mode of politics? Natalie Etoke does not provide an answer. But she recognizes that "They are not a substitute or an escape from concrete engagement with the material conditions of Black oppression" (4). The cultural expressions and the artistes Etoke chose demonstrate even an ideological preference that seems to be an inability to hold together different strains of, and tension in, individual political visions.

These critical queries raise an even larger question: how does Natalie Etoke's proposed new humanness underlying black liberation politics enable us to rethink a humanistic ontology and sociology that are sufficiently broad to map the vast expanse of the ideological stretch the Africana world is capable of? How does the quest for black existential freedom deal with the abundance of anxieties generated by the friction of the two souls of black folks? To answer these queries, we need an intellectual framework that stretches from Natalie Etoke's brilliant *Black Existential Freedom* to Lewis Gordon's *Existential Africana* and intertwines diverse forms of existential articulation of freedom and liberation politics as well as humanistic traditions. There is no doubt that Natalie Etoke's new book enriches the content of a humanistic sociology. However, we have to go beyond *Black Existential Freedom* to be able to discern how difficult it is, in black existential thought, to answer the question of "who are we?" and "what shall we do?"—two fundamental questions that define identity and political action for blacks.

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