
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* by Nick Nesbitt

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REVIEWS

Nesbitt, Nick. *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2008.

On January 1, 1804, Haiti's chief general Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared the independence of Haiti, thus indicating the birth of the first black independent state in the history of the Western Hemisphere. Nick Nesbitt insists that the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804, led by Haiti's foremost general, Toussaint L'Ouverture, was the only triumphant slave revolution in world history, and has become a symbol of anticolonial revolt and universal emancipation. The slaves at Saint-Domingue who revolted against their masters in 1791 "invented decolonization" (9), thus making Haiti "the first postcolonial state" (56) in 1804. Nesbitt convincingly argues that the Haitian Revolution stands today as a reminder of former slaves' commitment to freedom and their affirmation of their humanity and dignity. They explicitly announced what was then thought impossible and unpractical—that is, the humanity of the enslaved and their natural desire for "inner freedom in an unfree world," which Nesbitt calls the "freedom of active creation" (2). In fact, according to Nesbitt, it was Haiti that fulfilled the failed promises of both French and American Revolutions concerning the unqualified and universal human right to freedom and equality (see chapters 1 and 4). Consequently, the author contends that the Haitian Revolution is not an appendix to the French Revolution, as eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century scholarship maintained. Rather, he proposes that the Haitian Revolution both embodies the principles of and is the historical fulfillment of central tenets of Enlightenment thought. In other words, it was at Saint-Domingue that such abstract ideas were tested and came into their full force in historically concrete form (see chapters 2 and 3). The ultimate test of the global pretensions of *Les droits de l'homme* (*Rights of Man*), the universal principles of liberty and equality affirmed in 1789 by the French *Assemblée nationale constituante*, was realized in Haiti through a series of forceful and unstoppable events between the years of 1791 and 1804 (see chapter 5). Accordingly, as Nesbitt forcefully argues, the so-called Enlightenment was not solely a European radical phenomenon; the slaves at Saint-Domingue were also actors and makers of history. They were, in short, the architects and defenders of the rights of man and universal emancipation.

Universal Emancipation joins and continues a long overdue conversation about the political, ethical, and philosophical ramifications of the Haitian Revolution, which are carefully analyzed in recent influential works such as Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004) and Susan Buck-Morss's *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009). Fischer's basic thesis is that Western historiography has silenced the Haitian Revolution because it was necessary for the development of a hegemonic concept of Western modernity rooted in an ethics of differentiation and otherness. She contends that the Revolution challenged the notion of European particular-

ism as universal. In this way, the Western world disengaged the question of race, racial inequality, and the culture of slavery which it had created and which was necessary for its survival. In her path-breaking study, Buck-Morss demonstrates that the events of Saint-Domingue inspired Hegel's theoretical model of the master-slave dialectic. She argues that revolutionary Haiti has contributed considerably to European critical discourses on subjectivity, freedom, identity, and consciousness. These recent studies constitute a major attempt to situate Haiti's revolutionary events within the modern philosophical discourses of the Western world, and thus have contributed significantly to Haitian revolutionary scholarship.

The major thesis of the *Universal Emancipation* is that "the construction of a society without slavery, one of a *universal* and *unqualified* human right to freedom, properly stands as Haiti's unique contribution to humanity" (2). Consequently, Nesbitt contends that the Haitian Revolution has considerable relevance for contemporary debates on human rights, ethics, and universalism. The author insists that the idea of 1804 goes beyond the politics of French Jacobinism and that Toussaint L'Ouverture transcends the conditions and confinements of Western political autonomy.

Nesbitt engages rigorously with a number of prominent figures in the Western intellectual canon, including Spinoza, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Ranciere, Laclau, Deleuze, and Habermas. He demonstrates the contradictions embedded in various philosophical schools espoused by Western and Enlightenment thinkers concerning the debates on natural rights/law and human rights, and the repercussions of these ideas for an emancipated society. Kant proposed gradual reform within a contractual society and argued against any kind of revolution against the general will of the state. On one hand, Spinoza advanced a progressive notion of natural law (85); on the other hand, it was Rousseau, in contrast to other Enlightenment intellectuals, who envisioned that human freedom could be actualized in a just society structured by law and order. Rousseau posited that freedom is a "historical and contingent human *potentiality*" (89).

Nesbitt's study is ambitious in scope, and it is sometimes unclear how the philosophical theories he discusses are connected to the historical events of 1791–1804 leading to the Haitian Revolution. It is clear, as one considers the historical records of this peculiar revolution, including the oral reports from former slave survivors, that the slaves of French Saint-Domingue did probably anticipate universal emancipation from enslavement as a political process and moral imperative. The author sustains this claim by quoting Toussaint's ultimate objective for *liberté générale*: "The sacred fire of liberty that we have acquired' not as a local libertarian predilection, but as a universal project that must encompass all humankind" (60). It is true, as Nesbitt contends, that Toussaint and his revolutionaries did not have to "look to the North Atlantic, late-eighteenth-century world to find a model for a universal declaration of human rights" (45). Yet Nesbitt fails to show the extent to which Haiti's foremost general and his colleagues were influenced by the principles of Mali's Mandé Charter of 1222, which articulates the foundations for universal human rights, and which the author discusses only in passing. Notably, historians of the Haitian Revolution continue to explore the process by which certain elements in African cultures (i.e. Vodun), a neglected area, contributed to a nascent Haitian conception of freedom and human rights and ultimately helped former slaves in Saint-Domingue develop their own revolutionary principles of universal emancipation. Though the author seems to support

the fundamental role of Vodun in the achievement of the Haitian freedom, he does not discuss substantially how this religious practice provided “psychological liberation” to former slaves in striving for their physical liberation (30). Also severely debated among scholars is the objective(s) of slave insurgents at Saint-Domingue which culminated in the triumphant revolution of 1804. Nesbitt, however, seems to suggest that the call for *liberté générale* began as early as in 1791, when “Haitian slaves demanded their human rights” (137), and the news of the slave revolt “arrived in France in November of that year” (143). Consequently, contemporary scholarship on the Haitian Revolution must reckon with the following factors: (1) the humanity of the slave and his natural desire to be free; (2) early slave rebellions prior to and during the Middle Passage; and (3) early slave rebellions in the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Evidently, continuous black resistance and protest along the lines of the wars of independence in Saint-Domingue have proven that gradual and yet total emancipation from enslavement was not an ambiguous notion among the slaves. Rather, it was the ultimate marker of being human and free, and “the founding and determinant idea of the Haitian Revolution” (141). These events confirm Rousseau’s famous claim that “Man is born free.”

Universal Emancipation is a rigorous and creative reinterpretation of the events at Saint-Domingue, and an important rereading of major Western intellectual discourses through the lens of the Haitian Revolution. The significance of this work is also the author’s presentation of the Revolution in its universal/historical applicability.

—Celucien L. Joseph

Muyumba, Walton M. *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.

Many texts that have examined African American culture after 1950 have done so from the perspective of the Civil Rights Movement. These studies usually submerge the cultural struggles of African American intellectuals within the necessary and important political and social history of the period; they consequently neglect the work of writers and social critics that do not exclusively focus on Civil Rights. Those historians that focus on jazz or on individual authors move in the other direction, lifting the music/culture of jazz or the writings of an African American writer out of the larger context of the period. In writing *The Shadow and the Act*, however, Walton M. Muyumba has managed to return both jazz culture and the writings of African American thinkers back into the larger struggle not only for racial equality but also for an individual African American identity in the postwar American landscape.

Muyumba premises his text by claiming that it is a study of jazz and pragmatic philosophy couched within the larger context of African American culture after the Second World War. *The Shadow and the Act* also goes well beyond yet another study of jazz culture and African American literature, taking three of the larger postwar writers—Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka—and explaining their significance to the success of the Civil Rights Movements and the growing centrality of African American