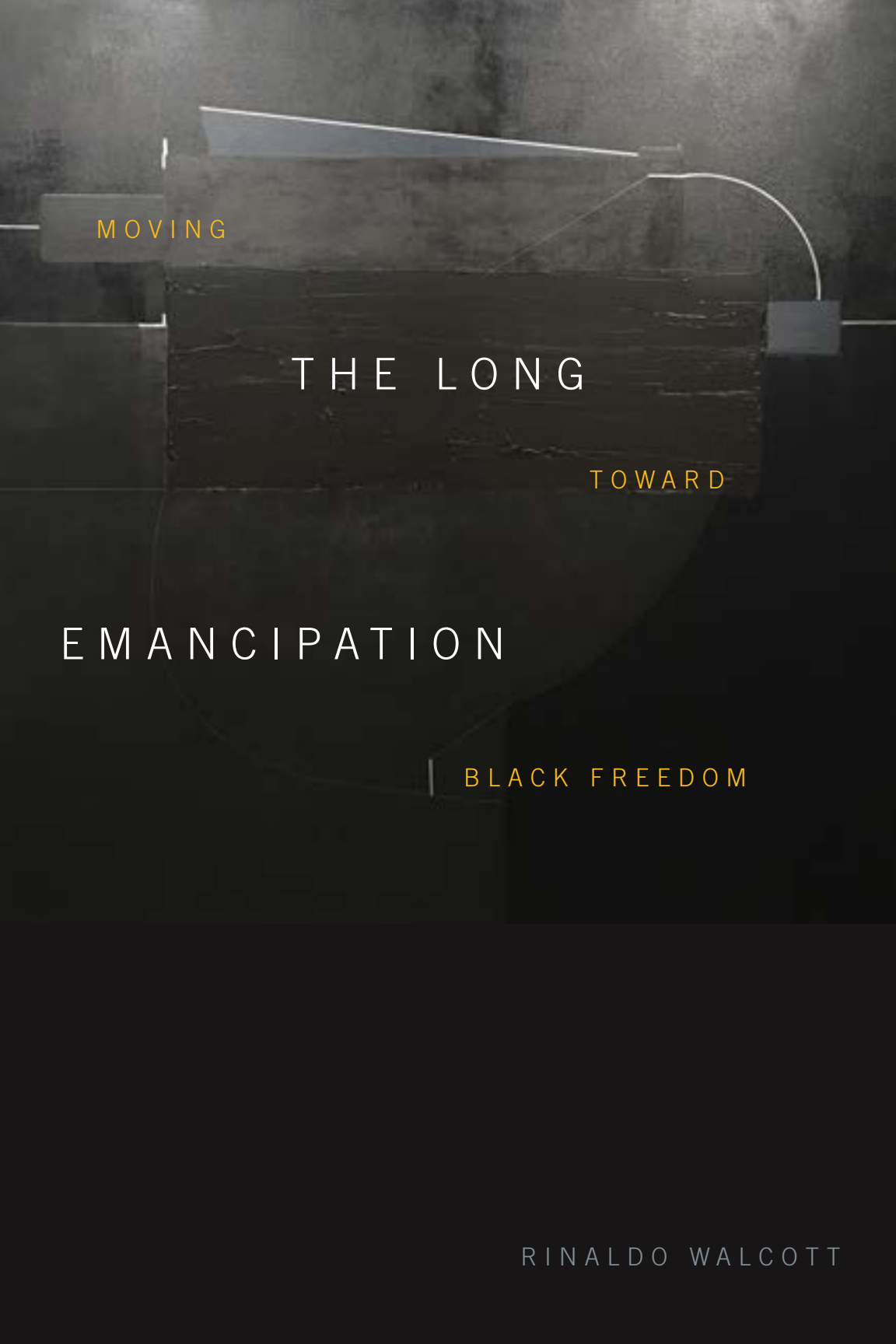
MOVING
THE LONG
TOWARD
EMANCIPATION
BLACK FREEDOM
RINALDO WALCOTT

THE LONG EMANCIPATION

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For Abdi Osman WHO IS EVERYTHING.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay exists because of persistence. All of it faults, limitations, mistakes, and missed opportunities can be credited to me. I begin these acknowledgments in the negative because a short and small book about freedom is a risk. But freedom, or the desire for it, especially by Black people, is a risk too. The idea for this essay began when Katherine McKittrick and *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* invited me to give the Antipode lecture at the American Geographers Association meeting in 2014 in Tampa, Florida. I thank them very much for the opportunity that made this essay thinkable and possible. The invitation sparked in me the idea that I might have something to say about freedom, an idea that has stayed with me in a powerful way. From that lecture the idea of the long emancipation as both a phrase and a concept was further cemented when the graduate students of the Department of English at McGill University invited me to give a keynote at their conference in 2015. It was between those two invitations that the idea of the long emancipation was confirmed for me as something worth pursuing and sharing with others.

Most powerfully, the problem of freedom for Black people impressed itself on me in the era of the Obama presidency and the spectacularization of Black death across North America and beyond. For almost one full day and mostly into the night, Christina Sharpe and I DMed each other on Twitter after images of Mike Brown lying dead and uncovered in the streets of Ferguson appeared online and protests broke out there. The Movement for Black Lives was (re)ignited with the murder of Trayvon Martin, but Mike Brown's death crystallized something about Black people and freedom that remains difficult to articulate, even after writing the words here. I profusely thank Christina for everything she has done to make this essay a reality. It has come to this stage primarily because of her; she refused to let me abandon it.

Black Lives Matter is a central and unnamed figure in this work. The Movement for Black Lives and Black Lives Matter – Toronto and the larger

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1. MOVING TOWARD BLACK FREEDOM

Time would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not quality of goods and utility which matter, but movement: not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there.
—C. L. R. JAMES, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963)

Set the captives free.
—BOB MARLEY, "Exodus," from *Exodus* (1977)

The conditions of Black life, past and present, work against any notion that what we inhabit in the now is freedom. Postslavery and postcolony, Black people, globally, have yet to experience freedom. We remain in the time of emancipation. *Emancipation* is commonly understood as the "freeing of the slaves" in the post-Columbus world, but emancipation is a legal process and term that I will argue marks continued unfreedom, *not* the freedom it supposedly ushered in. The legal parameters of emancipation in each region were different, but in no instance did emancipation give the formerly enslaved the right simply to leave their surroundings. In the British emancipation proclamation, for example, the formerly enslaved were to serve as apprentices for up to seven years (1834–40). It was the ex-slaves' resistance to apprenticeship that led to a speeding up of emancipation. It is in the moment of accelerated legal emancipation that the contours of freedom, or a potential freedom, begin to take shape for Black people. In fact, one must note that at every moment Black peoples have sought, for themselves, to assert what freedom might mean and look like, those desires and acts toward freedom have been violently interdicted. It is this ongoing interdiction of a potential Black freedom that I have termed *the long emancipation*.

In this essay, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom*, I argue that we are still in the time of emancipation and that freedom, which is extra-emancipation or beyond the logic of emancipation, is yet to come.

What, then, is freedom? What am I defining as freedom? How do I demarcate why and how Black peoples do not yet have something called freedom? I understand emancipation as always embedded in the juridical and thus as always orienting and delimiting freedom. Freedom resists guarantees of comportment. I define freedom as ways of being human in the world that exist beyond the realm of the juridical and that allow for bodily sovereignty. I argue that freedom marks an individual and a collective desire to be *in common* and *in difference* in a world that is nonhierarchical and nonviolent. It marks, as well, the social, political, and imaginative conditions that make possible multiple ways of being in the world. With the phrases *in common* and *in difference*, I am stressing that collective commonality can occur alongside individual self-actualization. In other words, the ways that human beings share common experiences of the world we inhabit do not have to erase individual wants, desires, and needs. But the time of the long emancipation continues to tie Black people to the regimen of slave and plantation logics and economies. The idea of freedom that I am attempting to articulate here is one that imagines a break with those logics.

Indeed, most definitions of freedom are circular, repeating the word *freedom* or *free*, which is then rendered in opposition to something else: in this sense, one is often freed (passive voice) from or to A or B as an expression of freedom. Black freedom is often offered only in opposition to the history of enslavement—an idea that recognizes the former (slavery) but struggles to articulate what we do not yet have a language for (something more). I suggest that, especially for Black people, the idea of freedom contains both oppositionality and the something more. By making such a claim, I am interested in examining what I call *glimpses of Black freedom*, those moments of the something more that exist inside of the dire conditions of our present Black unfreedom. To glimpse Black freedom requires that those of us who look for it reject the modes of looking and assessing freedom that blackness itself often refuses. The major ideals of modernity that constitute the normative registers of recognizing freedom do not, in fact, give us insight into the ways that Black beings make something like freedom appear. Blackness's refusals include, but are not limited to, representative democracy; the institution of policing; modes of comportment in terms of fashion, style, and attitude; reformist logics that retain the present shape of the world; nationalisms of all kinds; as well as a more generally assumed mode of human life as one of linear progression and human perfection. I suggest that the conditions of a potential Black freedom remain

outside of modernity's imagining. There is a tension within the logic of modernist freedom, which assumes a linearity—that one perfects *what it means to be human* in a linear fashion. That maturation narrative is one in which, for example, first we can recognize white women as human beings, and then we can recognize white gays and lesbians as humans, and that recognition offers a kind of fulfillment of the promise of freedom. Black freedom, I argue, is much more eruptive and much more disruptive than the so-called freedoms offered up by that kind of narrative.

Black freedom, or a potential Black freedom, exposes that tension and refuses that kind of linear narrative. A potential Black freedom is more like a set of eruptions that push against and within how we have come to understand what freedom is, that push against what is often offered to us as a logic of the maturation of human life. As Saidiya Hartman has articulated so clearly in *Scenes of Subjection*, that "burdened individuality" gives the lie to the logic of liberalism's linear progressive narrative precisely because of the ways that modernist logics of freedom are deployed against Black people and how Black people themselves have largely come to imagine what freedom might be.[1] Put another way, all of our present conceptions of freedom, understood within that linear progressive narrative, actually prohibit Black subjects' access to that very same linear modernist freedom.

What, then, is the long emancipation? It is the continuation of the juridical and legislative status of Black nonbeing. The use of the term *emancipation* as a synonym for *freedom* can only continue to make sense because it is through legislative and juridical practices and regimes that Black people come into a status that is other than that of being the enslaved. In other words, this logic can only hold if freedom, as far as the Black is concerned, is legislative and conferred. What emancipation does not do is to make a sharp and necessary break with the social relations that underpin slavery. That this break has not yet happened is why we are still in the period of emancipation. We recognize this as it plays out in our present times in the ways that other modes of the legislative and the juridical come into play through social proscriptions around Black dress and movement, from baseball caps and saggin' pants to stop-and-frisk and carding to what Frank Wilderson identifies as the ongoing "ipso facto" deputization of white people.[2] These proscriptions are, in effect, the legacies of a juridical emancipated Black status that remains tied to the social relations and former conditions of enslavement.

Whether we are speaking of the time of emancipation in the British Caribbean or in the United States, the legislation passed to end chattel slav-

ery did not allow those newly unowned peoples fully to become a part of the polities where they live. Instead, emancipation legislation held the formerly enslaved in captive relationship to their very recent past.[3] By so doing, emancipation legislation sets up a structure in which the newly emancipated are tutored, in often degrading fashion, into a new reorienting political and social polity. In that new polity, Black people are placed in a position of subordinated lives in which further resistance continues to push the boundaries of what constitutes emancipation. But I insist that Black people do experience moments of freedom that are unscripted, imaginative, and beyond our current modes of intelligibility. Each push by the formerly enslaved is an eruption of a potential Black freedom, but each push is also contained by the juridical and legislative elasticity of the logic of emancipation as partial, as incremental, as apprenticed.

In these pages, I explore the potential of Black freedom, and I point to how we might dwell in its fleeting moments. The central conceit of this work is to grapple with a desired sovereignty of Black being, a desire that Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, puts into the mouth of Baby Suggs. Sethe, in her "rememory" of Baby Suggs, remembers it this way:

> In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. . . . What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give leavins instead. No they don't love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. . . . More than

your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.[4]

With Baby Suggs's sermon in the Clearing, Morrison offers us an engagement with the Black body and Black personhood as sites onto which the conditions of freedom and unfreedom are projected. Reading this sermon points to that which must be undone so that Black freedom might be glimpsed globally. The reclaiming of the flesh as a body, a body loved, is a glimpse of freedom in its kinetic form where freedom meets love, and where love becomes an activating force toward a potential freedom. In this instance, freedom exists beyond the material even though it is also, and importantly, material conditions. Indeed, love, a nonmaterial condition, becomes a major context for moving toward freedom. Freedom as imminent condition—Derridean language on democracy as that which is "to come" might point us toward this—is both belated and always just ahead of us. Black freedom has been denied despite juridical emancipation, and that denial produces the conditions of a future-oriented Black expressivity—a Black freedom to come. It is my argument that Black life most clearly reveals the limits of the conditions of freedom because Black life seems to dwell in that Derridean "to come" that is always anticipatory and future-oriented. Black life points us toward what freedom might be, and ultimately is, a project yet to come.

Any serious student of Black life can but note the multiple ways in which freedom is continually interdicted and prohibited for Black subjects. And yet Black people's desires for freedom and to be free find expression in their resistances to ways of being that would deny them bodily sovereignty (through their embodiment, community formations, etc.). In this work, I think what lies between that which is prohibited and that which is gestured to can offer insights into and evidence of a freedom to come. Furthermore, Black freedom is not just freedom for Black subjects; it is a freedom that inaugurates an entirely new human experience for everyone. Black freedom, then, is not one kind of freedom that sits alongside other kinds of freedom; it is a global reorienting and radical reordering phenomenon. This is not an exceptionalist argument on behalf of Black people but an accounting of the ways that Black people's dispossession and its possible rectification would require global reordering, rethinking, and remaking; such an accounting would mean a reorientation of the planet and all modes of being human on it. With such an accounting, new registers of life would appear.

Where we see glimpses of Black freedom to come, we see it as the Black body configures and reconfigures modes of being in the world, often in

the vernacular cultures of Black people's everyday and ordinary lives. The manner in which Black people "own" their bodies and the ways in which music, dance, clothing, attitude(s), posture, affect, optic, and opinion keep language and a range of practices both tied closely to the body and emanating from it allow for us to glimpse Black freedom in fleeting moments. Again, in noticing such practices, the material conditions and something beyond them are marked as central to thinking what freedom can be. I turn to several vernacular moments and practices, to think about how Black freedom and unfreedom register and the ways in which those practices are violently interdicted. When I speak of the vernacular, I mean to note all of those moments of creativity of Black beings that initially exist outside of or in response to dominant and normative institutions and modes of being. The vernacular marks Black inventiveness and Black ways of being that create Black self-conscious worlds. The vernacular is a particularly fertile site for thinking about Black freedom because the vernacular is, contradictorily and simultaneously, a sovereign site of Black expressivity and creativity and one of the most heavily policed and interdicted sites of Black life.

Black Power and the Black Arts Movement attempted to bring Black vernacular practices into existence as legitimate modes of being Black in the world for both Black people and others, and in many ways they were successful. These political and artistic moments self-consciously aestheticized what was formerly degraded and dismissed. Such practices offer contemporary critics a different way to think about the work of the Black vernacular as enacting and pointing to a potential Black freedom. Indeed, the white state's supremacist response to Black Power and the Black Arts Movement demonstrates that these attempts, or acts, of a potential freedom must too be undermined and violently interdicted—thus the genesis of the surveillance and infiltration project of the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) and, more recently, the agency's creation of the "Black Identity Extremist" designation to apply to Black activists.

Nonetheless, Black people continue to find ways of engaging vernacular practices in which to narrate their lives to themselves—*from within and against* the proscribed conditions set by white supremacy. As Robin D. G. Kelley has long pointed out, Black men have remade the street corner as one site of communal gathering that is both labor and pleasure.[5] At the same time, a site like the corner is policed by the state and understood as in opposition to whiteness as the only proper form of comportment. Such eruptions of freedom are also policed by forms of Black respectability pre-

mised on a linear modernist notion of freedom that is (un)consciously drawn from a template for whiteness. Black women have remade hair as fashion beyond the haircut or "hairstyle," and Black women's hair remains a significant site of cultural debate, disgust, and cultural appropriation. In the midst of such approbation and disgust, and attacked with the (dubious) category of female beauty based in whiteness, Black women create lifeworlds in which their modes of speech, their "hairstyles," and even their bodily parts are replicated and desired and claimed as beautiful on others, not them.[6] Black vernacular forms, whether bodily or of another form of materiality, when appropriated are often capitalized and celebrated in service of others. All of this marks what I call the long emancipation, where one does not have full possession of one's being and where the one, in fact, who would claim ownership over you is compensated and not the one (Black) who is doing the labor.

To think these ambivalences and contradictions, this work grapples with the insights of Sylvia Wynter, that philosopher of the Americas, in "1492: A New World View," on questions of the human and the requirement that we (re)think what the human might be. In a world where Black people have been ejected from the category of the human and have struggled both to enter it and to reanimate what it might/can mean, (re)thinking the human is central to any notion of a freedom for which we do not yet have the words. Following Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and Wynter in "1492: A New World View," *The Long Emancipation* is committed to the notion of a new humanism, beginning in the acknowledgment that our present conceptions of what it means to be human and a subject do not currently include Black people. Indeed, such conceptions of the human cannot contain them.[7]

1. MOVING TOWARD BLACK FREEDOM

1 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 31.

2 Wilderson writes, "White people are, ipso facto, deputized in the face of Black people, whether they know it (consciously) or not." Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 82.

3 I am referring here to the practice of apprenticeship in the United States and the Caribbean. Also at play here are prison convict work camps and vagrancy and morality laws and clauses.

4 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume Books, 1988), 88–89.

5 Robin D. G. Kelley, "Looking to Get Paid: How Some Black Youth Put Culture to Work," in *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 43–77.

6 The Kardashians are an example of how white women remake parts of their bodies to accentuate them. The very body parts considered ugly or unattractive on Black women's bodies are now deemed beautiful in their "artificial" enhancements on white women's bodies—lips and buttocks being the most popular.

7 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Books, 1967); Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 1–57.

3. DEATH AND FREEDOM

1 Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post–Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See in particular the chapter "Round Trips on the Black Star Line," 195–258.

2 Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001), 25.