

“The Burden” Or What It Means to Be Black in America Today

Yesmina Khedhir

Riley, Rochelle, ed. *The Burden: African Americans and the Enduring Impact of Slavery*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2018. 178 pages. ISBN 978-0-8143-4514-6. Hb. Npr.

It is often perceived that great books perplex readers and make them think. *The Burden: African Americans and the Enduring Impact of Slavery* is certainly one of these works. With the word “BURDEN” inscribed repeatedly and reproduced systematically with black letters on a black background, the reader can indeed feel that the burden is real. Published in 2018 and edited by Rochelle Riley, an African American award-winning journalist and advocate of racial equality and justice, *The Burden*, as described in the blurb, is “a plea to America to understand what life post-slavery remains like for many African Americans.” Drawing mainly from personal experiences, the book addresses the continuing legacy and lasting influence of slavery on people of African descent in today’s America. Its major premise is to show that enslavement has not ended and that its intergenerational effects can still be perceived in African Americans’ everyday life. Various forms of modern institutional racism, such as incarceration, job discrimination, social inequality, poverty, and unequal opportunities in various domains of life are stressed and documented by the authors. From a wide range of perspectives, the book mainly reflects on African American life and culture in post-slavery America and the overwhelming sense of psychological and cultural trauma that American slavery has created among the descendants of enslaved people. The book comprises twenty-four essays written by a number of African American leading thinkers, educators, and artists. Despite the wide range of mostly personal stories told by the contributors, a common denominator brings them all together: the insistence on the “enduring impact” of slavery and the traumatic effect that the latter has had on people of African descent in America up until today.

The Burden is published as a response to a false claim that announces the end of racism and the beginning of a post-racial era, especially with the election of America’s first black president, Barack Obama, in 2008. Numerous books and articles have been published since then to repudiate this fallacious assumption, to mention but a few, Roy H. Kaplan’s *The Myth of Post-Racial America* (2011), Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012)—the latter contending that African Americans live

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 25.2. 2019. Copyright © 2019 by HJEAS. All rights to reproduction in any form are reserved.

in a “New Jim Crow” era and that the American justice system has functioned, since the Civil Rights movement, as a tool for racial discrimination through the massive imprisonment of people of color— Ronald W. Walters’s article “The Impact of Slavery on 20th- and 21st-Century Black Progress” (2012)— claiming that “one of the most persistent, yet devastating myths is that slavery ended in 1865” (110)— Edward E. Baptist’s seminal work *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014), and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s book-length essay “Between the World and Me” (2015) and his article “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration” (2015).

Based on diverse life experiences, *The Burden* offers a comprehensive and intriguing insight into the legacy of slavery and displays how it continues to determine every aspect of African Americans’ lives. One of the major and most convincing arguments that the book makes about how white America has always tried to deny the gloomy history of slavery is the exclusion of the latter from educational curricula. In her article, “The Armor We Still Need,” biographer A’Leilia Bundles, for instance, criticizes America’s “false narrative” (29) of public education. She offers the example of her American history class back in 1968, in a white-dominated public school in Indianapolis, where her white teacher and history textbook taught her that “slaves” (and not “enslaved people”) were “‘contented’ with being enslaved” (24) and received all care from their benevolent masters, while excluding any reference to Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass and their resistance and revolt against the “peculiar institution” (23-24). Similarly, Torrance G. Latham in his study “Our New Civil Rights Movement Will Begin in Our Schools,” explains how white America has always wanted to bury the gloomiest and most inhuman part of its history and found comfort in what he calls “historical amnesia to racism” (141). Both Bundles and Latham insist on the importance of self-education and self-awareness. For them, the best way to fight historical falsification and negation is by seeking reliable sources, indulging in a journey of self-discovery, revising history, and creating a counter-history.

One other major focus of a number of essays in the book is black women and their history of resistance before and after the presumed end of slavery. For instance, Charlene A. Carruthers, queer feminist writer, highlights the huge pain and trauma that black women had to suffer and survive during the Middle Passage and recounts her emotionally charged visit to the “female slave dungeon” in Cape Coast, Ghana, in the summer of 2015. As a site of memory loaded with atrocious stories of rape, suffering, and torture, the “female slave dungeon” is, for Carruthers, the starting point of the commodification and sexual objectification of black womanhood, relevant

even today. “There, the horrors of slavery reproduced the worst of humanity including the roots of today’s pervasive mistreatment and dehumanization of black women in the Americas” (41). Tamara Winfrey-Harris also makes this connection between how the mindset and stereotypes created during slavery have defined the way in which white America views and treats black women and girls up until today. Labeled often as “delicate, virginal and in need of protection” (73), black girls, as Winfrey-Harris contends, are sexualized and criminalized, and are thus treated firmly and continuously disciplined both by the law and by society. Furthermore, T’Keyah Crystal Keymàh’s “Not Just Hair” criticizes the Eurocentric mainstream definition of female beauty and argues that black women have been taught to hate their Afro-hair and spend billions of dollars on hair products just to mimic and attain the Eurocentric standards of beauty. Keymàh brilliantly compares this to a “cultural, economic, and sometimes physical suicide” (131).

Two further essays focus on the rising police violence and brutality in the US against people of color in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Leonard Pitts Jr.’s article “Eternal Bondage” argues that “the criminal injustice system is the new slavery” (59) and contends that replacing chains by handcuffs, the prison institution is used as a tool to incarcerate and control black life. In the same vein, Vann R. Newkirk II denounces the random and intentional killing of black males in particular and asserts that, to adopt W. E. B. Du Bois’s term, the “color line” (3) will continue to define not only the twentieth but the twenty-first century as well.

Reading *The Burden*, one cannot fail to notice the overwhelming feeling of trauma and distress that predominate most of the articles. The editor, Rochelle Riley in her essay “The Burden,” defines slavery as “a wound that has not been allowed to heal” (6). For her, the problem with the legacy of slavery is far deeper than its physical brutality, what is at stake is rather the psychic bruise and psychological trauma that are transmitted from one generation to another, the bitter memory that keeps surfacing in black consciousness with every racist incident. Tim Reid compares slavery to “[c]ancer, a condition that doesn’t go away but lives in the stories of your grandparents” (56). The role of the generational trauma and past memories are crucial for understanding the continuing feeling of pain and fear that determines black lives up until today. This ever-lasting physical and psychological effect of slavery is further emphasized by Aisha Hinds, who opens up her heart to the reader and speaks about her struggle with her own fear, low self-esteem, and self-hatred as a black teenager. Hinds, an American television, stage, and film actress, has, in fact, succeeded in turning her

weakness into strength and her fear into performance on the stage and screen with which she honors her ancestors and aspires to change minds.

Reading *The Burden* could be a painful or unsettling experience for some readers given the general pessimistic mood of the book and the heart-touching, and sometimes poignant, stories told by the contributors. Though it is often a good sign for a book to reach to the heart and provoke the feelings of the reader, this rather comes at the expense of showing the undeniable and real progress that African Americans have achieved and for which they continue to struggle. However, this does not affect in any sense the great value of the book and its success in creating a counter-narrative that gives a full-fledged image of what it means to be black in today's America.

The Burden has certainly achieved its major goal of attesting that post-racism is a myth and that the ghost of slavery continues to determine and haunt the lives of African Americans, thus enlightening or changing the readers' conception about the reality of racism in the US. *The Burden*, with its broad range of perspectives, is a recommended work for all readers, but more specifically for ones interested in black history, cultural studies, and social studies, with a specific focus on race relations in America.

University of Debrecen

Works Cited

- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Ed. Brent Hayes Edwards. Oxford: OUP, 2007. Print.
- Walters, Ronald W. "The Impact of Slavery on 20th- and 21st-Century Black Progress." *The Journal of African American History*. 97. 1–2. (2012): 110–30. Print.