

## Alexandra Brown- 'The Empire Pays Back' reflection

Today we were joined by the esteemed professor of Theology and scholar activist, Robert Beckford. I must say that I have admired Beckford's work and commitment to social justice, for many years, so it was truly an honour to share this platform with him.

Within today's session, I had the pleasure of being in conversation with Beckford regarding his 2016 documentary, 'The Empire Pays Back'. In short, the documentary saw Beckford, explore the economic impact of Britain's direct involvement within the C15-19 Transatlantic chattel slavery. Thus, the documentary was primarily concerned with the legacy and wealth that resulted from the enslaving and trafficking of Africans to the Caribbean, as well as how this continues to impact their descendants (which notably includes both Robert and I).

The first question I asked Beckford was,

1. 'Please could you unpack the title of the documentary. Who/ what are you referring to through the use of the term 'empire'? What is meant by 'pays back?'

In his answer, Beckford stated that reference to the term 'empire' was used to signify Britain's involvement within chattel slavery, which lasted from 1492- 1838. Beckford also noted that whilst slavery was said to have ended in 1834, chattel slavery had not been eradicated in its entirety as the practice of 'apprenticeship'<sup>1</sup> had been legally enforced.

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<sup>1</sup> The new law immediately freed those [enslaved folks] under the age of six years old. Those who were older became 'apprentices' for up to eight years. Traditionally, an apprentice was taken on, for four to seven years, by another person to be taught a trade. The apprentice usually received board and lodging in return for the work they do whilst learning. The term apprenticeship was applied to the stage between slavery and freedom. The idea was that the formerly enslaved were 'learning how to be free'. They worked for their former enslaver, for three-quarters of their time, and could work for others for the rest of the week and receive a small wage. Whilst this period was said to prepare the formerly enslaved for freedom, their circumstances and treatment was similar, if not identical to that of them being enslaved] (Port cities Bristol, 2024:1)

When seeking to clarify what was meant by 'pays back', Beckford said that the payback would come in the form of reparations. What's more, it is the descendants and the beneficiaries of Chattel slavery (within the period stated above) that would need to compensate the economic and emotional harm caused. Additionally, the paying back would act as a form of repair. Beckford reminded us that it is not enough to say sorry, reparative action must be taken.

2. To further build on Beckford's deeply insightful answer, I drew towards my own personal readings, and referenced a statement I came across, as I thought it was in keeping with Robert's earlier sentiments. The statement read,

*'We are not accepting verbal apologies this year, only change in behaviour'*

I then asked, if, and in what way, does it resonate with his thinking and the documentary. Beckford responded to my question with the reminder that such statements very much align with the Pan-African philosophy of Marcus Garvey, a thinker, and figure whom Beckford holds in very high regard. Garvey's Pan-African philosophy dictates that in order for justice to prevail, 'you must give back what has been stolen'.

Beckford then went on to share some of his ponderings on the 'philosophy of apology'. He then spoke about how within many white English/ British folks, there is now something which has been termed 'apology fatigue'. When asked to expand on this term, Beckford said that despite living in a socio-political climate where there is a growing awareness about the violence of chattel slavery, this has not led to concurrent change in future generations. As such the words of regret and apologies, without transformative change has become such that, we are seeing a widespread intergenerational failure to take the issue seriously.

It was at this point in the conversation, that many within the audience began to reflect deeply on the current state of affairs, and there seemed to be a collective sigh of despair.

3. When asked by a member of the audience, what inspires and drives you to do this work, Beckford spoke proudly and openly about his Christian faith and how through the liberatory praxis of Black Liberation Theology, he has the courage and the strength to do this work.

He also noted that reparations is indeed biblical and referred to the famous example of Zacchaeus (the greedy tax collector) publicly declaring, after his encounter with Jesus that, he will give half of his possessions to the poor and he will repay anyone he stole from, by giving them four times the amount, he cheated them out of.

This was indeed a significant moment in the conversation, in particular for schoolteachers, as often, Liberation Theology is deemed as having no scriptural basis, and thus simply a socio-political reading of the text, void of any divine commandment. However, this example in future discussions was identified as a powerful way in which children in both primary and secondary classrooms, can understand the practical underpinnings of Liberation Theology.

4. When asked by another attendee how best to teach students about the formative nature of slavery, Beckford powerfully responded that the learning cannot solely take place within the classroom, rather, it must be an embodied experience. He then referred us back to the anti-racist tour guides that featured in the documentary, as well as his walk to significant landmarks in London, which also act as monuments for Britain's colonial atrocities. Beckford did well to remind the audience that decolonial and anti-racist education must be embodied, and therefore, our senses must be awakened and utilised when learning about such things. He then recommended organising trips to museums, local landmarks in one's

local area and sites of cultural heritage. Not only did this neatly link back to the Race And education film club's decolonial check-in, it further acted as a reminder that the Transatlantic chattel slavery was not solely an intellectual project, as such, our attempts to unlearn and dismantle its legacy must not be limited to the classroom.

5. One of the lasting points that Robert left us with, was a reminder of something that was said during the documentary, 'a major export of slavery is racism'. Therefore, if one truly wishes to do authentic anti-racist and decolonial work, not historicizing racism is doing 'incomplete work'. We must remember the significance of plantocracy<sup>2</sup> and the ways this then gave birth to racial hierarchies. Beckford reminded us that all forms of oppression dwells in everyone, and that we must seek to address and repair the multifaceted damage that slavery and colonialism has and continues to cause.

Within the Womanist<sup>3</sup> tradition, of which I adhere to, we often describe the sharing of knowledge and wisdom in ways, through the lexicon of our cultural heritage and tradition. When I recall how I felt 'building'<sup>4</sup> with Robert, what immediately came to mind was many of the delicious food from our shared Jamaican heritage. As such, I wish to say that I experienced the conversation as Robert inviting us to a table where he generously gifted us with a feast, that nourished our minds, bodies and spirit. The session promised to be captivating and enthralling, and as to be expected, Robert did not disappoint.

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the racialised class hierarchies that was born within the context of slavery, that has informed modernity and continues today

<sup>3</sup> A term first used by the African American novelist and writer Alice Walker to describe an ethics of care, in which black women's lived experience is brought to bear on issue that impact the world they inhabit

<sup>4</sup> A term commonly used within the African American tradition, to describe the process of Building knowledge, gaining wisdom and increasing our understanding

Whilst there is much I could include and say, I wish to close this reflection, by sharing a prose, which was inspired by the feast that Robert prepared.

When I asked myself the question, what are some of the things every anti-racist and decolonial teacher needs to carry with them in their metaphysical 'teaching bag' this is what came to mind,

Curiosity

An open mind

Humility- to be taught by those who are often marginalised, silenced and preferably unheard

A pen and note pad- you will learn many things on this journey. It is imperative that you archive as much as you can. It is vital that a record of everything that occurred is kept, as there are some who will not believe you. They will try to convince you of the subjective nature of this experience, and thus render it 'interesting, but not real knowledge'. Whilst holding on tightly to your pen and notepad, remember that certain things can never adequately be described through the medium of the written form. Consequently, conversations, classroom lessons and a plethora of artistic expressions will be needed to keep alive all that you have learnt.

A mirror- so you can gaze at the ways in which colonialism has seeped into your pours

A travel card- this journey will require movement, after all, anti-racist and decolonial RE/ RWV necessitates an embodied experience

\*The style of this poem was informed by Victoria I. Ekpo's reflection, 'A critical authenticity: Facilitating teacher self-articulation through poetic inquiry'

## Bibliography

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