

Book Review

IDENTIFYING ROOTS: Alex Haley and the Anthropology of Scriptures. By Richard W. Newton, Jr. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2020.

Richard W. Newton, Jr., an anthropologist of scriptures, examines Alex Haley's *Roots* as a scripture of the United States. Meticulously researched and theorized, this book stands at the crossroads of American Studies, Religious Studies, and U.S. History. Newton's wordplay with *uprooting*, *routing*, and *taking root* refers to the complex processes of identity-making through rootedness. That is, *uprooting* as displacement, *routing* as the manifold ways an uprooted person can negotiate for validation among those "more firmly planted in the habitus" (14), and *taking root* refers to the ways that the uprooted have formed a secure and stable identity.

Instead of associating "scripture" with "religious," Newton argues that *Roots* is a quintessentially American scripture because scriptures are spaces through which people position themselves "against [the text], and interpolat[e] themselves into [the text]" (142). While Newton agrees that the rhizomic metaphor of Deleuze and Guattari better represents how meaning-making occurs, Newton focuses on the social life of scriptures, that is, what scriptures *do* for and with people. Scriptures give people the appearance of rootedness; it *rootinizes* "in that [cultural circumstances] no longer appear conspicuous" (267). In this way, Newton argues, Alex Haley's *Roots* "was not just an author's 'routes' or attempt at meaning-making, but also an offering of 'roots,' a scripture by which Americans are to know and be known" (144).

Written as stand-alone essays, each chapter is a unique contribution. Chapter 1 places Alex Haley in his own cultural and geographic context, both in the United States and in the Black Atlantic. This chapter explores the perspective of Black uplift and civil rights. In the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley sets his own family rootedness against Malcolm X's interpreted uprootedness. Chapter 2 examines Alex Haley's journey to find historical evidence for *Roots*. Haley's *Roots* made the past of a Black Family the quintessential American family. Chapters 3 and 4 look beyond Alex Haley to *Roots* the scripture and its use by people within U.S. culture. Chapter 3 provides a close reading of the story (Chapter 3 could be read as a stand-alone with an excellent summary, discussion, and analysis of the book and its key figures) and posits that Haley offered identity as a way to root and solve racism in the U.S. *Roots* itself shows the process of uprooting, routing, and taking root and serves as an exemplar for those who do take root (e.g. Kizzy and Tom) and a cautionary tale for those who do not (e.g.

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Chicken George). Chapter 4 turns to a discourse analysis of popular culture, citing explicit references to Kunta Kinte in TV, film, and music, examining how specifically Black Americans took on this scriptural text to better route and root. Chapter 5 turns its examination to the field as a whole and the way scholars and theologians have used *Roots*. Importantly, this chapter argues that scriptures are not based on religion, but instead on “rootwork.” Newton “contend[s] that were we to predicate ‘scriptures’ on naturalistic understandings—rather than the ‘sui generis religion’... we would better observe the ways marginalized communities read, write, and redact themselves within the tradition of their dominators to express agency” (21).

Make no mistake, this book is not for the theoretically faint-of-heart! Richard seamlessly puts theoretical masterminds in conversation with one another—Audre Lorde and Bourdieu, Deleuze and Talal Asad, W.C. Smith and Bayart, to name only a few. His pop culture examples, from LeVar Burton to *Fresh Prince* and *Boyz n the Hood*, are read through lenses of Wimbush, Fanon, and de Certeau. But Newton is making his own unique theoretical contribution to the field of cultural studies and the meaning of scriptures in our culture. A truly *trans*-disciplinary book (as Wimbush would say), Newton’s work stands at the cutting edge of American Studies and Religious Studies.

Theory does not bog down this book; instead, theory serves as a lens for understanding the work that Alex Haley’s *Roots* has done and continues to do. This book will be useful for scholars in their research as well as in the classroom. I recommend this book for both undergraduates (with guidance) and graduate students interested in how people use texts to form or *rootinize* identity for themselves and others in the United States.

Rachel E. C. Beckley
University of Kansas