



THIRD STONE

Book Review

**Courtia Newland, *A River Called Time*
Canongate Books, 2021**

A long time ago (I was in college; perhaps I should write “a long, long, *long* time ago”), when I was a student at Florida A&M University, I asked the brilliant Cornel West a question: why are so few prominent Black intellectuals teaching at HBCUs?

To write about Black people, to theorize and interrogate Blackness, and analyze Black rage in spaces that weren’t predominantly White but overwhelmingly so presented a strange challenge: how to maintain authenticity and clarity of purpose? West described the problems of resources, arguing, convincingly that elite White institutes offer more time for research and financial support...But West’s response makes us wonder: What do Black creative and intellectual spaces, when properly nurtured, offer us? Does the group positioned most opposite whiteness and power offer valuable, still unheard, still unexamined, lessons about the liberation of all people?

A story seeped in Black mythology, Courtia Newland’s *A River Called Time* examines a Diasporic Blackness, and at first glance, it too offers no way out. Newland argues he set out to write “a decolonized novel,” a novel set in a parallel world where the horrors of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and colonization never happened. In this parallel world, “African cosmology had become the dominant global religion,” and characters may not appear physically Black (some of Newland’s characters have green or blue skin, in reference to Black gods and goddesses like Osiris and Euzerlie, who always appears wearing blue). Newland’s world is dystopian, overflowing with poverty and violence, despite some of the characters achieving the miraculous: Markriss, Newland’s protagonist, can astrally project and land in dreamlike extensions of time. Yet despite this, Markriss experiences the loss of a sibling, separation from his mother and the rest of his family, economic uncertainty, a totalitarian corporate government, and the early deaths of some of his friends. Newland’s provides an obvious lesson: replacing one form of cultural domination with another results not in liberation but in replicating another system of hierarchy, control, and authority.

This is what Newland wants. The characters in Britain Newland’s thoughtful experiment reinforce that what makes Blackness a space for liberation are its historical

anchors and visions for a more equal world. In other words, a Blackness devoid of history and struggle, is no longer Black. Blackness means understanding the psychology of oppression and using that knowledge to create greater compassion and empathy. It means recognizing the resiliency and ingenuity of oppressed people in impossible circumstances. When we talk about liberation, we want meaningful change. But the “Hotep” Afrocentricity, the pseudo-Blackness widely mocked on social media, the kind Newland purposefully interrogates, isn’t change, and it isn’t Black. It’s not a Black creative or imaginative space. It’s not a space where people find freedom. The Hotep philosophy is sexist, steeped in a false Black masculinity that doesn’t serve anyone (not even the brothers). It doesn’t offer resistance or a challenge to dominant culture.

Markriss teaches us this, as we witness his rebellion against the corporate, media-controlling society and towards a small, vibrant community of outsiders and freedom fighters.

Rochelle Spencer, 2021