

## Opening Chant

### *The Full Has Never Been Told: Heresy, Prophecy, Praxis, and the Black Radical Political Intellectual*

*I came into the world imbued with the will to find meanings in things  
My spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then  
Found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.*  
—Frantz Fanon

*We refuse to be  
What you wanted us to be  
We are what we are  
That's the way it's going to be*  
—Bob Marley

### Introduction

For the last five hundred years or so, the practices of the black radical political intellectual have been in large part a product of modernity. Her or his contributions to radical thought should not be ghettoized into closed discursive boxes which marginalize those contributions, making them specific and unique only to what has loosely been called “the black experience.” This “black experience” had its origins within the interstices of modernity and is often a counterpoint to its progressive universalist claims.

The various narratives of modernity generally agree that modernity’s emergence was accompanied by what Hans Blumenberg has called the “self-assertion of reason.” Many accounts also argue that in the radical political domain, the 1789 French Revolution inaugurated conceptions of citizenship and sovereignty as forms of political modernity replacing previous religious and aristocratic ones; the 1776 American Revolution cleared new political horizons; and the remarkable works of the several European Enlightenments provided new grounds for our studies of both the human and the natural sciences. What is oftentimes elided is that the overarching framework for modernity’s emergence was the rise of racial slavery, colonialism, and new forms of empires; that the conceptions of “rational selfinterested subjects” were embedded in a philosophical anthropology of bourgeois Enlightenment and Eurocentrism. This has enormous consequences for the history of thought. Thus, even when it is now widely accepted that any history of modern thought which privileges the Western intellectual tradition is Eurocentric and flawed,<sup>1</sup> there still remains another layer of difficulty in the history of thought and the study of black thinkers.

Lewis Gordon has noted that it is a common habit to study the thought of black thinkers as primarily derivative.<sup>2</sup> The practice results from the confluence of five different sources. The first is the assumption that Africana thinkers should be studied primarily for their experiences. Here the notions, the political and historical conceptions that have animated Africana radical thinkers’ historic engagement with the West (racial slavery, colonialism, and racial oppression), are reduced to a series of actions and musings bereft of any serious thought. Reason still remains the preserve of the West. What this means is that thinkers like C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, and W. E. B. Du Bois are never credited with intellectual independence or originality. Their ideas exist only *in relationship to* and *because of* the already accepted systems of thought. Consequently, there is a great chain of thought constructed around a hierarchical order wherein Africana thinkers are located on the margins. In this chain, radical Africana thinkers piggyback on Marx or Sartre, their intellectual validation passing through the ideas of the accepted “giants.”

The second source is a more general one and concerns the way political ideas and political thought are studied. Quentin Skinner, in his call for a form of linguistic historicism, has made the point that the traditional methods for the study of political thought and the history of ideas are fraught with difficulties. He suggests a revisionist methodology that pays more attention to linguistic codes, authorial intentions, and historicism.<sup>3</sup> Such procedures obviously mean revisiting methodologies that privilege the autonomy of the text and broaden the perennial context-text debate. While Skinner’s revisionist procedures push us in the direction of his injunction that “We must learn to think for ourselves,”<sup>4</sup> they are still prob-lematic. Skinner is right to destabilize the way in which the traditional history of political thought is studied as a seamless

system of ideas of great thinkers. But in narrowly focusing on linguistic historicism he misses the ways in which political questions that are not yet fully answered keep on reappearing in different periods. It is a point which Joseph Femia makes when he argues that “social practice determines what is thought; it does not follow, however, that what is thought cannot, in some cases and in varying degrees, transcend its context.”<sup>5</sup>

What is accurate is that when we deploy the traditional method of studying ideas which searches for links, coherence and integration, regularity and linearity, it excludes from our horizon that which is different, and forces us into a false canonization process. As Michel Foucault notes, “A discursive formation is not ... a smooth text.”<sup>6</sup> And since a smooth text brooks neither ruptures nor contradictions, the fever and fret of the thinker, of his or her life and its complexities are reduced to patterns of thought already organized and consolidated. Such smooth, settled patterns yield negligible results in the study of Africana thinkers, particularly those who have a complex engagement with the Western intellectual tradition.

The third source of the difficulty resides in the relationship of power, knowledge, and the creation of discursive systems. Both Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci were preoccupied in different ways with this conundrum of an ideational system. Foucault’s discussion of the problematic of power—knowledge relations and the way in which power structures an epistemic field—and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and its various modes of structuring thought suggest possible directions of how to study black radical thought and black political intellectuals. Radical Africana thought is obviously engaged in the creation of counterhegemonic texts. However, the critical question is: At what moment does rupture begin? The contestation typically begins as dialogical; there is intertextuality, and then rupture. The study of black radical intellectual production requires us to be historically concrete not so much in very carefully tracing its original sources as in finding the critical points of rupture and understanding the new categories when they are thrown up. In this regard, as I will attempt to show later on, while Foucault and Gramsci are valuable touchstones for plotting the genealogy of the black radical intellectual tradition, they are not the complete guides.

The fourth problem resides in the fact that many of the theories and frameworks which currently reject the privileged position of the Western episteme are themselves rooted in the conceptual protocols of this tradition. In particular they ignore the black or anticolonial intellectual tradition, and as such their critique of the Western intellectual tradition is oftentimes an internalist one that, while useful and important, displays similar assumptions about the “native” or black.<sup>7</sup> So when the Western tradition is unmasked, deconstructed, and decentered by these writers, the in-tellectual resources called upon are the thinkers who critiqued the modern project but who themselves are an integral part of the canon. This is not to reject the extraordinary importance of many of the theorists who have critiqued modernity (e.g., Nietzsche; Heidegger, rescued from his explicit Nazi associations; and Wittgenstein). These thinkers’ writings have spawned a wide range of criticisms that are of current significance in the field of postcolonial studies. Instead, I wish to draw attention to a problem that still remains (and it is both an intellectual and political one)—what do those who were “outside,” who have been “objects amongst objects,” have to say? What are their discursive practices, and how should we study them? Do they form an independent intellectual tradition that we need to recognize and then critically engage? Finally, can we lump the discursive practices of these thinkers only in the category of the postcolonial?

The fifth difficulty is the ways in which Africa is still represented, and its politics and human experiences are portrayed and studied in the so-called serious press, the prestigious organs of the Western intellectual tradition, and the popular mind. Conradian “heart of darkness” leitmotifs in contemporary writings and political discourses concerning Africa still abound. The internationally famous *Economist*, in a bold headline superimposed on an African male placed in the middle of a map of the African continent with a modern instrument of death, proclaimed on one of its cover pages in May 2000 that Africa was “The hopeless continent.” Not to be outdone, *The New York Review of Books*, on June 29, 2000, against a black-bordered backdrop, announced that Sierra Leone was “the worst place on earth.” We are not reviewing here nineteenth-century travel writings of European explorers or missionaries, but the productions of some of the West’s most prestigious contemporary publications.

What is intriguing is that none of the above representations of Africa attempts in any substantive way to tell the full story. For example, we still do not get in any discussions of the conflict in the Congo an account of the years of complicity between the “civilized” nations of Belgium and the United States that led to Western intervention in the Congo and the murder of Patrice Lumumba, his body dismembered by a

“hacksaw and dissolved in sulfuric acid.”<sup>8</sup> Nor do we get any insight into how the gruesome practice of the chopping of hands was a common habit encouraged by colonial powers in central Africa in their rush to extract rubber.<sup>9</sup> At the core of the present-day Western “invention of Africa” is a knowledge regime that fails to grapple both with African realities and with its own internal mythological representations constructed over centuries.

This is not an apology for the African elite who have constructed a set of politics that continues to oppress Africans. It is simply to point out that a number of these practices of the African elite are in many instances continuations of various models of “colonial governmentality.”<sup>10</sup> Africa has fifty-two nation-states. In 2000 there were five war zones: Sierra Leone, Angola, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The northern border of the DRC is a porous one in which groups from Rwanda and Uganda move back and forth engaging in military conflict. Therefore to stretch things a bit, we might say eight African nations at that time were involved in some sort of military conflict. That certainly does not constitute a hopeless continent. But this continued “Conradian” representation of Africa is only the latest expression of the persistent location of African human experiences in a global racial hierarchical order.<sup>11</sup> Historically embedded inside the major categories of Western political thought are conceptions of “civilization” and the unpreparedness of the colonized for self-rule. Such ideas still profoundly shape the ways in which mainstream history of thought negotiates the nature of African ideas.

## Intellectuals and Politics

The legacies of being a racial-slave-colonial object haunt twentieth-century black radical thinkers. As descendants of slaves they master the protocols, the conventions, and the traditions of the modern Western intellectual tradition. The Western tradition was initially constructed on natural history classificatory schemes of racial order which located those of African descent as nonhuman. One consequence is that a stream of the black radical intellectual tradition deals with thought through the mastering of both the language and the culture of the dominant power—white supremacy or colonialism. Such a process establishes epistemic boundaries. Thus many black radical intellectuals consistently wrestle with language, consciousness, the nature of the ordinary, and the meaning of Africa to their life and work. This cauldron opens different spaces for the twentieth-century radical black intellectual—spaces that cannot be captured in studies of thought which trace in smooth fashion the emergence, attribution, and trajectory of ideas.

In grappling with these issues, I began to work through the precise meaning of the black radical political intellectual, using many of the standard paradigms. My first stop was an engagement with Gramsci’s conceptions of the nature and functions of intellectuals. Gramsci’s primary concern was the location and function of intellectuals as a social group, and the relationship of knowledge production to both questions of domination and the proletarian revolution. In examining these questions he states, “One is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighed, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort.”<sup>12</sup> From this perspective Gramsci moves to develop two categories of intellectuals—“traditional” and “organic.”

In radical political thought the “organic” intellectual has become a central preoccupation. For example, Cornel West deploys a broad notion of the “organic” which affirms that there are two “organic traditions in African-American life: the Christian tradition of preaching and the black musical tradition of performance.”<sup>13</sup> West’s conception points to two central dimensions of black intellectual production, but it does not explore what each means nor, most important, their interiority. Indeed, West’s main preoccupations are the various applications of Western categories to black intellectual production rather than excavating the tradition itself. In “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” West’s categories of the black intellectual simply follow the different schools of Western thought, and in the end he delineates a separation between the “life of the mind,” political activists, and cultural artists which seems to deny that politics is also an expression of profound cognitive capacities.

Second, West bemoans the fact that there are no really great black literary intellectuals except Toni Morrison, nor great black Marxists other than, perhaps, C. L. R. James. Historical accuracy aside, what is ignored here is how the dialogical engagement of black thinkers with the Western intellectual tradition produces thought that needs to be both documented and analyzed. To see the black radical intellectual

tradition as operating wholly inside the Western canon, and then to judge its many contributors solely from that angle, is both to miss the tradition's complexity and to negate the tremendous knowledge that this tradition has postulated about the nature of the West.<sup>14</sup>

How Cornel West misses the fact that Du Bois was one of the major radical political thinkers of the twentieth century, contributing new knowledge not only to politics but also to historical theory, is partly a result of the ways in which he allows the category "organic" to flavor his view of the black radical intellectual. The Gramscian conception of "organic" intellectual is an unsatisfactory one to explain the black radical intellectual tradition primarily because it deals with functions and sociological relationships of intellectuals. This analytical notion does not spell out the nature and the engagement of the black radical political intellectual in the struggles for political and human freedom. Indeed, its purpose was not to do so.<sup>15</sup> Without doubt the black radical political intellectual often functions as an "organic" intellectual. But this is only part of the story. The key question is the nature of his or her political engagements and the character of his or her contributions to radical thought. To call the black radical intellectual an "organic" intellectual describes only function and relationships, not what that functioning means both for radical thought and for the topography of the black intellectual tradition. Thus, to rely solely on Gramsci in this instance limits our exploration.

Edward Said, in grappling with the nature of twentieth-century intellectual life, suggests that the radical intellectual is an outsider and asserts, "The interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo."<sup>16</sup> Said pays some attention to Gramscian conceptions, but is more concerned to make the distinction between the professional intellectual and the amateur. He argues that the latter is committed to "engagement with ideas and values in the public sphere."<sup>17</sup> The character of the amateur's engagement, Said says, is to "represent ... the collective suffering of your own people ... reinforcing memory."<sup>18</sup> This stance, he argues, "universalizes the crisis, to give further human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others."<sup>19</sup> I want to suggest that Said's radical intellectual is a *public* intellectual, who functions as a social critic.

Over the last decade there has been substantial concern about the nature of intellectuals and their relationship to politics and social criticism.<sup>20</sup> The debates have focused on the issues of autonomy, "self-marginality," and the conception of the intellectual as an interpreter. The core assumption of the debate is that of Karl Mannheim, who argued that in the modern world, "in the place of a closed and thoroughly organized stratum, a free intelligentsia has risen."<sup>21</sup> However when elements of this group become radical, then the issue is how they should function. The response of Said and others is to detail the radical intellectual as a *public* intellectual. Perhaps part of this response was generated by the controversy surrounding Russell Jacoby's stance in *The Last Intellectuals*.<sup>22</sup> However, what Jacoby was lamenting was the supposed eclipse of the public intellectual who spoke to a "public world and [in] a public language."<sup>23</sup>

This is different species of intellectual practice from that of a *political* intellectual, although the latter includes some elements of the *public* intellectual. Because even though "speaking truth to power" as a form of social criticism is to some degree a political act, any observation of black radical intellectual production would illustrate that the central figures of this tradition were explicitly *political*, seeking to organize, having the courage to stand by or break with organizations and programs while developing an intellectual praxis that made politics not a god but a practice for human good. Theirs was not just a practice of social criticism but oftentimes of organized efforts to intervene in social and political life.

Michael Walzer notes that the languages of radical intellectuals consisted of "political censure, moral indictment, skeptical question, satiric comment, angry prophecy, utopian speculation."<sup>24</sup> However, as we will see in the various chapters, there was more within the black radical tradition. In the end, many of the contemporary arguments about the radical intellectual do not adequately describe black radical intellectual production, and are woefully inadequate in supporting any hermeneutical practice on the writings and political activities of C. L. R. James, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin, to cite a few important members of the black radical intellectual tradition.

But what, you may ask, about the classic arguments of Julien Benda? In *Treason of Intellectuals* Benda argues that the real intellectuals are "those whose activity is essentially *not* the pursuit of practical aims ... and hence in a certain manner say: their kingdom is not of this world."<sup>25</sup> Benda designates these individuals as "clerks" who live in "opposition" to the multitude and adopt "abstract principles ... superior to and directly opposed to these passions."<sup>26</sup> Writing in 1928, Benda is preoccupied with what he calls the "rise in

political passions” and the way it seems to him that many intellectuals “betrayed” their vocation of “abstract principles.” His portrayal of intellectuals as persons with abstract principles in direct opposition to political passions is not particularly relevant to any serious discussion of black radical intellectual production, except to remind us that his work is an important marker in the Western conceptual history of the intellectual. Benda draws his inspiration from both Platonic conceptions of knowledge and the early European clergy’s historic practices of knowledge keeping and dissemination. His other importance for our present discussion is that his views are still frequently echoed to suggest that intellectuals and the enterprise of thought should not be contaminated by existence.

There is, however, another set of conceptions about intellectuals to which we should pay some attention. Isaiah Berlin has written extensively about the history of ideas. It is generally acknowledged that his work on Russian thinkers and on Giambattista Vico were much-needed additions to the history of Western thought. However what is of interest to us here is Berlin’s sense about the role of the Russian intelligentsia. Berlin begins his arguments about the Russian intelligentsia with a rehearsal of the nature of Russian society in the late nineteenth century. He makes the point that the Russian intelligentsia was “a minority of persons who had access to the civilization of the West and freely read languages. They were almost foreigners in their own land ... those among them with sensitive consciences were acutely aware of a natural obligation to help their fellows.”<sup>27</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that by the turn of the twentieth century, the Russian intelligentsia as a group was one of the most radical. It produced writers such as Tolstoy and Turgenev and political intellectuals such as Plekhanov, Lenin, and Trotsky. Berlin argues that this intelligentsia was remarkable for its commitment to the salvation of Russia. He suggests that its achievements resided in their application of Western ideas to “backward Russia.”<sup>28</sup> On the surface this argument seems to fit the radical black intellectual particularly in the colonial context. But closer scrutiny reveals flaws. Colonialism attempts to be a totalizing knowledge regime. The radical colonized intellectual finds herself, as Fanon says, sometimes a foreigner in her own land once she begins the process of reconnecting with the native population.<sup>29</sup> Reconnection leads to new knowledge and the rejection of the Western episteme rooted in the negation of the colonized.

Thus the problem of black radical intellectual production is a different one. Black radical intellectual production is not simply reducible to an application of Western modernity in the ways that Berlin suggested the radical Russian intelligentsia did; instead it is a critique of, and oftentimes a counterdiscourse about, the nature of Western modernity. So while Berlin’s analysis of the Russian intelligentsia is useful in our efforts to grapple with the complex history of radical intellectuals, it does not offer a real model for our study of black radical intellectual production.

Much of the contemporary debates on the nature of the intellectual within mainstream history of thought still revolves around two issues—the intellectual as expert and the intellectual as critic. Jürgen Habermas, in discussing this, explains that the

intellectual commits himself on behalf of public interests as a sideline so to speak (something that distinguishes him from both journalists and dilettantes) without giving up his professional involvement in contexts of meaning that have an autonomous logic of their own, but also being swallowed up by the organizational forms of political activity.<sup>30</sup>

Such a conception of intellectuals continues the binary opposition in Western thought identified by Hannah Arendt in her 1958 text, *The Human Condition*. Arendt argues that this binary opposition between a life of the mind and that of the body and action is a false distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Of course, Arendt is primarily concerned with a phenomenological analysis of political philosophy, but her insights into the ways in which the history of Western political thought is organized is largely accurate. Habermas, by operating within this dichotomous frame, does not supply adequate conceptual tools for us to critically engage the ideas of the black radical intellectual tradition.

## The Study of Black Radicals

The study of radical black intellectuals requires us to excavate the ideas of black radicals, to probe and discover the questions they raise in their political discourses and practices. This route may allow us to theorize about the discursive practices of black radicalism while deploying the conceptual resources that emerge from our examination. In this regard I want to suggest that there are two major streams of black radical intellectual production—the heretic and the prophetic. Let us first turn to the heretic stream. This stream is represented by the highly educated figures of C. L. R. James, Anna Julia Cooper, Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Rodney, Ida B. Wells, and Julius Nyerere, among many others.

We are aware that all discursive practices are historical. Thought abstracted from history and context, from human agency, can become a textual plaything in insignificant language games, “all sound and fury, signifying nothing.” So in our study of black radicals it behooves us to rehearse briefly some of the intellectual and contextual legacies and ideas that shape the black radical intellectual. Cedric Robinson in his seminal text *Black Marxism* observes that by the twentieth century, the black intelligentsia was rooted in the growth of a black “middle-class” which had developed in the world system. He describes the life of this group thus:

In the Anglophone, Francophone, and Latin territories of both hemispheres, the Black “middle-class” had become broadly identified by culture and language, that is their abilities to absorb the cultures of their ruling classes and the reading and speaking of European tongues. Deracination, social and cultural alienation had become the measures of their “civility,” loyalty and usefulness.<sup>31</sup>

There are three things of import here. First is the perception of this “middle-class” by the colonial powers as a native class formed ideationally in its own mirror image and designated as the all-important buffer group between the colonial powers and the native lower orders. This “class” had an ambiguous political relationship to the colonial power because even when it trained itself in the protocols of the West and imbibed Western language and civilization, it was still oftentimes excluded. Thus, the black or native middle class found itself alienated from the lower orders on class terms, cultural norms, and horizons, as well as excluded from the upper echelons of the ruling elite. The “in-betweenness” of this group is acute. Listen to W. E. B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* describing rural blacks at the turn of the twentieth century:

The Sea Islands of the Carolinas where they met were filled with a black folk of primitive type, touched and moulded less by the world about them than any others outside the Black Belt. Their appearance was uncouth, their language funny, but their hearts were human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power.<sup>32</sup>

Or to C. L. R. James describing Matthew Bondman in *Beyond a Boundary*: “For ne’er-do-well in fact vicious character, as he was, Matthew had one saving grace—Matthew could bat. More than that, Matthew so crude and vulgar in every aspect of his life with a bat in his hand was all grace and style.”<sup>33</sup> What saves the ordinary people who are located within the lower-class orders, in the eyes of these black radicals, is their ability to perform remarkable artistic endeavors. The alienation of the black middle class runs deep and, like all other forms of class hubris, involves conceptions of “decency and propriety.” What is critical to note is that this social distance, which is normal in classbound societies, becomes exaggerated within colonial and racialized societies, and the educated black or native “middle class” becomes a most tortured creature. Why?

The normative definitions of the colonial and racial order made all blacks and natives inferior. The educated black “middle-class,” clothed in the intellectual protocols of the West, must pay special attention to this distance from the black lower orders by engaging in a set of social practices that includes language, dress, speech, eating habits, religious and cultural practices. But they do this in a context of anti-black racism. This leads to our second point. The black intellectual through formal education becomes a European intellectual by training, learning to live within the framework of the Western episteme. James puts it well when he announces in *Beyond a Boundary*, “When I left school I was an educated person, but I had educated myself into a member of the British middle class with literary gifts.”<sup>34</sup> This leads to the third point. When

black radical intellectuals immerse themselves in the Western intellectual tradition, they often find their mimetic efforts futile. They become the native intellectuals who speak well, the black artists who have mastered *the* form very well, and if they begin to speak in the critical language and idiom of radical theory, they become specimens to behold, living examples that indeed the black native can be civilized. The native colonial intellectual or the black intellectual in an anti-black society is always proving himself or herself. All this, given the nature of the Western intellectual tradition, should be expected. But there is a more insidious problem that has faced the black radical intellectual since the inauguration of Western modernity.

Fanon points out in *Black Skin, White Masks* that to “speak means to be in a certain position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”<sup>35</sup> The implications of this are profound for radical black intellectuals. The question is, if words and language are the mechanisms by which intellectuals organize their practices, then in an anti-black society and colonial context, what is the political language they should speak? The problem is particularly acute for Africa, since colonialism attempted to impose linguistic control on the mosaic of African nations carved up at the late nineteenth-century Berlin conference.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o asserts that European languages became the discourse for literature and intellectual achievement, but it was the African peasantry who kept alive “their own mother tongues.”<sup>36</sup> Within the African context this problem can be partly resolved by developing a political grammar and vocabulary rooted in the mother tongue.<sup>37</sup> One of the individuals whom we examine, Julius Nyerere, was able to achieve this with some degree of success in Tanzania by making KiSwahili the national political language. This action created the grounds for Tanzanian intellectuals to think in concrete Tanzanian and African terms.

For both continental and diasporic Africana thinkers, political language is central to political discourse. What do the terms and language of radical politics mean when invoked in the colonial context or in a situation of racial oppression? As black intellectuals become radicalized, they grapple with the categories of thought by which they have learned to live. However, they quickly find themselves in an intellectual cul-de-sac, for these categories are opaque; they shed little light on the nature of the colonial or racial condition. So the black radical intellectual begins the torturous passage of making her way back to the horizons of the native/lower-order population left behind. In doing so, she begins with history, with reclamation announcing the agency of the black colonized people. On deeper examination, the reclamation of *this* history becomes a practice and narrative that displaces what had been taught about the progressive universality of the Western intellectual categories. It also questions the accepted historical narratives and representations of who the colonized people are. At this point the black radical political intellectual becomes bereft of an anchor. Yet it is in the return passages to the native lower orders that the black radical intellectual begins to carve out the discursive space of the black radical intellectual tradition. It is then that he or she becomes a *heretic* intellectual ... one significant stream of black intellectual production.

## Heresy and Black Radical Intellectual Production

In modern usage the term “heresy” is defined as a form of deviation from orthodoxy. In the Spanish Inquisition, heresy was regarded as Muslim infidelity. The infidels were described as “the heretics and apostates of our time” who engaged in “betrayal and evasion of the truth.” The *Repertorium Inquisitorium* defined how the meaning of heresy shifted from its original Greek roots of the exercise of free will to the questioning of religious authority and the renunciation of faith.<sup>38</sup> Pierre Bourdieu in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* discusses heresy in relation to *doxa*. Bourdieu argues that the ideational domain of any social formation has limits. Within these limits, systems of classifications reproduce their own logic, and the nature of the social and natural world appears as both logical and natural.<sup>39</sup> Nothing is possible outside this constructed natural order. Therefore, underpinning social orders are theories of knowledge that in their symbolic power “impose the principles of the construction of reality—in particular social reality.”<sup>40</sup> For Bourdieu, heresy occurs when the questioning of the *doxa* creates a new critical discourse.

When we use the word “heresy” to describe the actors of the black radical intellectual tradition, in what sense do we mean it? First, there is the sense of challenging orthodoxy. Black radical intellectual production oftentimes began with an engagement and dialogue with Western radical political ideas, and then moved on to a critique of these ideas as their incompleteness was revealed. Fanon’s famous remark that one always had to stretch Marx when dealing with the colonial situation is apropos here. In other words, black radical

intellectual production engages in a double operation—an engagement with Western radical theory and then a critique of this theory. In this sense black radical intellectual production is, to use Bourdieu’s word, “unthinkable,” breaking the epistemic limits established by the Western intellectual tradition. We are now well aware of the disciplinary dimension of orthodoxy, which fashions subjects into a specific set of social practices and customs—in the Spanish Inquisition, making the Muslim a Christian. For the black radical intellectual, “heresy” means becoming human, not white nor imitative of the colonial, but overturning white/European normativity—in the words of Robert Marley, refusing “what you wanted us to be.” Third, for the black radical intellectual, heresy is a constructive project, sometimes developing a different set of political and social categories. But let us double back a bit to see how heresy operates inside black intellectual production, because for many radical black intellectuals, heresy is not the first recourse. It comes only when “double consciousness” is subordinated.

Reviewing the black intellectual tradition, one finds a conceptual frame that equips us for probing the heretic ideas of black thinkers—W. E. B. Du Bois’s conception of “double consciousness.” Much ink has been expended on the meaning of “double consciousness.” In the manner typical of mainstream conceptual history, its antecedents have been traced to the writings of German romanticism, currents of American transcendentalism, and nineteenth-century psychology. Sometimes the notion has been used as a metaphor rather than a mode of analysis. In a remarkable text of intellectual excavation, Shamoan Zamir in *Dark Voices* posits an argument about the relationship of the notion of “double consciousness” to Du Bois’s reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*. He suggests that Du Bois’s thinking at the time was not a simple adaptation or echo of Hegel’s unhappy consciousness, but rather an attempt to creatively read the situation of African Americans at the start of the twentieth century. He further argues that it “represents the black middle class elite facing the failure of its own progressive ideals in the late nineteenth century ... under the gaze of white America.”<sup>41</sup>

While this insight is perhaps historically accurate, I think Du Bois as a radical black political intellectual was also getting at something else. A review of the passage, in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), would reveal the following.<sup>42</sup> First, although “double consciousness” is called “strife,” Du Bois makes the point that the African American is also gifted with what he calls a “second sight into this American world.”<sup>43</sup> Second, “double consciousness” is how one sees oneself “through the eyes of others,”<sup>44</sup> and also hides what Du Bois calls “true self-consciousness.”<sup>45</sup> At the level of discursive practices, this means that there is a strange gray area of being master of a set of discursive practices, of thinking in the major categories of these practices while recognizing that the categories themselves negate one’s self. This torturous conundrum is not a static one, and can generate creative deployment of ideas, particularly because those in this position inhabit a space and social location that facilitates radicalism—“the second sight.” From this perspective I wish to deploy “double consciousness” as a conceptual frame to explain the tensions inherent in many of the heretic Africana thinkers of the twentieth century.

Coping with modernity that negated one’s humanity created not only counternarratives of modernity’s history, practices, and meanings but also a dilemma for the Africana intellectual in the West—to *be in* and *of* the West, and yet to create inside the West an identity, a personhood which required that the West, in the words of Fanon, be left behind. In deploying the notion of “double consciousness” as a conceptual framework, I am suggesting that the kernel of the problematic for the heretic Africana intellectual is one of disjointed reflective consciousness. For the highly educated black radical intellectual there is a profound disjuncture between the lived experiences of being a racial/colonial subject and the account of this lived experience by his or her learned discursive system. This disjuncture (it is deeper than a contradiction) is the source of acute tension in the political discourses of many radical black thinkers.

The tension led Du Bois in 1940 to plaintively write, “In the folds of this European civilization I was born and shall die, imprisoned, conditioned, depressed, exalted and inspired. Integrally a part and yet, of much more significance, one of its rejected parts.”<sup>46</sup> It led James to retort sharply in the Caribbean in the 1960s, “I did not learn western civilization under a mango tree.” There is a clear historic tension in this stream of radical black intellectual production. To remain consistently radical, to rupture the boundaries that confine, the Africana radical thinker transforms “double consciousness” into heresy. Although the context is somewhat different for the continental African radical intellectual, heresy is also related to what Amilcar



Cabral calls “class-suicide,” which translates, in discursive terms, into what I wish to call *epistemic displacement*. In black radical intellectual production, heresy becomes the resolution to the tensions and disjuncture created by “double consciousness” and the enchantment of the Western intellectual tradition.

Another possible way of thinking about this dimension of black radical and anticolonial intellectual production in general is through the metaphor of Caliban. This character in Shakespeare’s 1623 play *The Tempest* has become representative of the thought of the “native” radical intellectual. C. L. R. James himself, in the epigraphs in *Beyond a Boundary*, invokes Caliban as the representative figure who, having learned the master’s language, pioneers “into regions Caesar never knew.”<sup>47</sup> The Caribbean political novelist George Lamming, in *Pleasures of Exile*, presents two essays in which he uses Caliban as representative of an anticolonial figure who contains “the seeds of revolt.”<sup>48</sup> Lamming, though, is acutely aware of the problematic of the Caliban trope, and writes, “We shall never explode Prospero’s old myth until we christen language afresh; until we show language as the product of human endeavors.”<sup>49</sup> This tension about Caliban is partly located in what the Cuban cultural critic Roberto Retamar tells us: that “Caliban is Shakespeare’s anagram for cannibal.”<sup>50</sup> The word developed from the word Carib, the European name for the humans who inhabited the Caribbean at the time of the first European conquest. Although Retamar further claims that by the late 1960s, in the works of the Caribbean poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite and others, Caliban took on a new meaning and became a symbol of resistance, I wish to suggest that this symbolic representation is highly problematic.

Learning Prospero’s language, Caliban uses it to curse him, but Caliban is already named. In other words, this deformed slave is already an *object*, a status given to him by Prospero. So the language he speaks is not only *foreign* to him, it also *describes* him. In the play, as Caliban curses Prospero, he wishes for freedom and notes that he is Prospero’s *subject* primarily because he was cheated out of his land. From a radical perspective, it would seem that Caliban has to reclaim his land as well as his identity. Obviously, at this point there is no return to an original identity, yet we are forced to ask the question: What happens when Caliban curses Prospero, proclaims freedom, and reclaims his land? Is he still Caliban, a slave created and named by Prospero, or does he become something else? Does not Caliban’s freedom require a second move on his part, one that creates a new language and political categories? Perhaps at this juncture we may move to Aimé Césaire’s version of this play.<sup>51</sup> When Caliban first announces his entrance on the stage in Césaire’s version, it is with “Uhuru.”<sup>52</sup> Prospero responds, “Mumbling your native language again. ...”<sup>53</sup>

In the dialogue which follows, Caliban announces to Prospero that he will never again answer to the name Caliban. When Prospero inquires why, Caliban responds in the following manner:

It’s the name given me by your hatred, and every time it’s spoken it’s an insult ... [he continues] Call me X. That would be best. Like a man without a name or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen. You talk about history ... well that’s history, and everyone knows it! Every time you summon me it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that you’ve stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru!<sup>54</sup>

I wish to suggest that this second move being proposed by Césaire’s Caliban is one where he casts away the trappings of colonial domination. So while James and others may begin by using the language of the master, the logic of emancipation carries them into uncharted waters. In other words, by pioneering into unknown regions, Caliban casts off the name and cloak of Caliban and ceases to exist. In the study of black radical and anticolonial intellectual production, we now need to move into a post-Caliban period. It is this sense of the need to break out of the discursive boxes in which Western political thought has confined us that now turns our discussion to the second stream of the Black radical intellectual tradition.

## Another Stream

The second stream of the black radical intellectual tradition is that of the “religious” men and women—those who constructed a set of practices and rationalities that sustained Africans in the diaspora and in continental Africa. This stream I wish to call *redemptive prophetic*. The figures in this stream were involved in localized resistance movements in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, in shaping the phenomenon that has been called “Ethiopianism.” In many instances these figures were the antithesis of the Western-educated intellectuals. Rooted in the subsoil of the African diaspora in the West in the period of early modernity, these persons (e.g., Boukman in Haiti and Gullah Jack in South Carolina) developed paradigmatic models of reasoning that were in sharp epistemological conflict with the heretic stream.

Studies of these persons, or the groups they formed and sustained, have yet to be formally recognized as a part of the accepted trajectory of the black radical intellectual tradition. Here, the core of the problem partly resides with definitions of *who* and *what* are intellectuals. To facilitate a breakout of these strictures, we might once more return to Gramsci, who convincingly argues that “There is no human activity from which any form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *Homo faber* cannot be separated from *Homo sapiens*.”<sup>55</sup> Although Gramsci then becomes entrapped in a schema where revolutionary class consciousness is reposed in the “organic” proletarian intellectual, his conception of thought is useful because it allows us to think in some different ways about radical political thought and practice. The political struggle of the colonized and racial subject is conducted in contexts of domination and oppression where traditional labor exploitation is overlaid with the negation of personhood. Thus labor exploitation is conjoined with racial and gender oppression. The native or the black, then, always exists in a zone of nonbeing. Resistance to this form of domination opens spaces for new political knowledge. In such contexts the formal public spaces of political action are sometimes the unlikely sites for the examination of forms of resistance and struggle. So if we fix our gaze there, we might end up in a state of disillusionment because when we look in the formal public spaces, we tend to look for the spectacular, the extraordinary explosive events, rather than the ordinary, deeply embedded in the cultural practices of the “lower orders” of the population.

If we accept—and history demonstrates this—that from the “subaltern” group there are the possibilities of elaboration of ideologies and conceptions which are oppositional to racism and colonial oppression, then new doors will be opened for us to understand different dimensions both of politics and of radical political thought. One of the intriguing features of the black radical political tradition is the number of individuals from the redemptive prophetic stream who conducted struggles for political freedom and against racial domination, and who were declared *insane* by the colonial authorities. Because their numbers litter black political history, we might pause here to reflect for a moment on the matter of insanity, confinement, and subject formation in the colonial context.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault notes that “Madness and non madness, reason and non reason are inextricably involved ... and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them.”<sup>56</sup> He argues that the growth of asylums in eighteenth-century Europe was integral to the disciplinary procedures of subject formation and the “world of confinement.” Foucault’s remarkable work tracks how the emergence of a liberal market economy created a discourse around the treatment and conceptions of the poor population. He charts how economic thought developed a new foundation of the social category called “the poor.” In Foucault’s genealogy, the growth of the asylum was deeply connected to all these issues.

However, Megan Vaughan has pointed out that there was no great confinement in colonial Africa to “match that of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.”<sup>57</sup> Madness in colonial Africa was related to the problems of colonial rule and the question of the nature of the African ... was she or he civilized? Vaughan writes, “The madman and madwoman emerge in the colonial historical record not as standing for the ‘other’ but more often as being insufficiently ‘other.’”<sup>58</sup> So although there was no “great confinement,” colonial ideas of reason, civilization, progress, the role of religion in relation to secularism, and the privileging of scientism as the highest form of knowledge meant that African figures who disturbed these orders had to be confined because they broke the mold of discipline, and thus of subject formation. Within the colonial regimes the disciplinary function of subject formation, of creating regulative behavior, was of extraordinary importance.

Because colonial domination broke up earlier societies, the colonial order had to construct new ways of

seeing politics, society, social life, love, the human, and all facets of human life. The confinement and classification of figures who broke these molds, of those who thought and organized in rationalities other than those created by Western modernity, had to be controlled. This does not mean that the colonial order did not arrest and control those who organized anticolonial politics through modern political forms—trade unions, political parties, and so on. Instead, it is to point us to other forms of politics that cannot be subsumed under protonationalist political forms. It is also to point to how this prophetic redemptive stream attempted to break the epistemological hold of the colonial knowledge regime. In such instances the first recourse of the colonial power, whether in Africa or in the Caribbean, was to confine and classify such persons or individuals as insane.

These prophetic redemptive figures, as was stated before, litter black political and social history, but their presence has been marginal in the study of black intellectual production. This is because, in large measure, black intellectual history continues to operate within the knowledge framework of an overweening Enlightenment historical reason. Many of these “mad” figures (Alexander Bedward, a nineteenth-century Jamaican healer; Leonard Howell, the acknowledged founder of the Rastafari movement; and Nontetha Nkwenke, a Xhosa prophetess and healer) attempted to reorder the epistemological rationalities of colonial conquest.<sup>59</sup> They were, in the colonial eyes, *unreason* as compared to European *reason* and disciplinary rationalities. Given the knowledge regime of colonialism, the practices of healing (of both body and polity) were confrontations with colonial power that struck at the very core of the modern colonial and racial project. The figures who were engaged in projects could neither be redeemed nor be fashioned. They were “mad” and seditious in the eyes of the colonial and racist order.

Certainly in Jamaica it must have seemed like a “madness” to the colonial order when in the 1930s Leonard Howell began to preach about a black king, denouncing the British monarchy, or when Alexander Bedward, resplendent in white robes, declared in August Town in the late nineteenth century that there was a black wall and a white wall, and that the former would soon crush the latter. The colonial white supremacist order of South Africa was deeply perturbed when Nontetha preached that the Day of Judgment was nigh, and that African people should unite against the established racial order. If racial and colonial oppression rests upon attempts to dehumanize human subjects, and human beings are self-reflective, then it should not be surprising that from the “subaltern,” those who have to reconstitute their humanness daily in ordinary ways, there would emerge ideas which over time became central to the black radical political tradition.<sup>60</sup>

So what are the elements of this prophetic redemptive stream? Historical scholarship on the nature of prophets in Africa suggests demarcations between three processes: divination, healing, and prophecy.<sup>61</sup> However, what is clear in any examination of the political role of prophetic figures is that to some degree they exercise all three functions. The political prophet in the Africana tradition gains knowledge by revelation, is able to prophesy, and heals and redeems. Let us use Leonard Howell and Alexander Bedward again as brief examples. Not only would they prophesy from dreams or revealed knowledge, but both were involved in healing practices. What makes the prophet redemptive in this tradition is that prophecy functions as a form of social criticism, a redemptive discourse that argues for the ending of colonial and racial oppression. This is a politics of the world upside down, which eschews the standard political forms and language of political modernity. As such, it is outside the pale of political modernity and is mistakenly viewed as “prelogical” or “prepolitical.”

In his discussion on Jewish religious practice, Michael Walzer makes the point that the biblical prophets were social critics. He states as well that prophets speak to a large audience and do a kind of talking which is “not so much an educated as an inspired and poetic version of what must have been sometimes.”<sup>62</sup> As a rule prophets call people to action; they remind them of their condition; they do not speak for themselves, but on behalf of other authorities that they claim hold the nation in judgment. The language of prophecy is poetic and visionary, and is rooted in conceptions of history. For the black radical political tradition, this language is embedded in two sources, biblical exegesis and the indigenous knowledge systems of the colonized native. This political form of struggle has created the religious/political category “millenarian.”<sup>63</sup>

The Africana redemptive prophets narrate a different story and history of colonialism and redemption. In elaborating this narrative they sometimes break from monochronic time frames and develop conceptions and historical narratives that collapse past and present, making no linear chronological distinctions. This is particularly true in some historical conceptions of the Rastafari movement, where redemption is a destructive/con-structive moment, an event rather than a process. In such frames history is a *now* between the

past and the future, without transitions. Oftentimes when one is tackling the redemptive tradition of black radical thought, the figure of Walter Benjamin comes to mind. Benjamin's thesis on the philosophy of history affirms that "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now."<sup>64</sup> The insight is remarkably similar to the prophetic vision of history in the black radical tradition and perhaps the similarities can be explained by the ways in which totalizing regimes locate "states of emergency" as they structure power and control.

The third feature to note of this redemptive stream is its creative usage of language to describe social conditions and affirm their humanity. In these instances the word —*la parole*—becomes a weapon, a chant, and an invocation beating against the walls of oppression as well as an "illocutionary force."<sup>65</sup> Language is a central feature for this stream as it reorders meanings. Used extensively, the different meanings of words contribute to an alternative political discourse. This discourse refigures political and religious languages, integrating them to create a new political grammar. Thus one of the most exciting things about mining this stream of the black radical intellectual tradition is the investigation of these new forms. In the study of political thought and philosophy, we now know that old political languages become transformed when they are exposed to new discursive practices. Within all streams of the black radical intellectual production this occurs. If we do not see it, perhaps it is because we are looking with the aid of categories that already shape our answers. We have to approach these issues humbly.

The final element of the redemptive stream is that it creates a "counter symbolic world and order."<sup>66</sup> The creation of a symbolic order that then overturns the hegemonic racist or colonial order is not only a semiotic challenge but also, importantly, a battle for human validation.

## A Common Link

There is a common link between these two streams within the black radical intellectual tradition that returns us to some familiar arguments about the nature of Western political thought. Hannah Arendt remarked that Western political philosophy never fully recovered from its Platonic origins of opposition to "polis and citizenship." She further observed in *The Human Condition* that political philosophy can easily be interpreted "as various attempts to find theoretical formulations and practical ways to escape from politics altogether." Arendt also reminds us that "The central political activity is action," and as such, it would appear that the experiences of citizenship or the lack thereof, as well as the practices of the construction of a political community, should be issues for political theory and thought.

There exists a deep political practice in Africana political thought that connects the lived social and political experiences of Africans and the African diaspora to the categories of political thought. Any observation of the political activity and writings of many members of the black radical intellectual tradition illustrates this. Between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, many figures represent this current of action and thought, "of praxis ascending to the level of thought"<sup>67</sup> (e.g., Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X). Wells's anti-lynching campaign and political writings mark new directions in Africana political thought about the nature of citizenship, rights, gender, race, and the political community in the context of the high noon of the white American republic. Marcus Garvey's political praxis of black internationalism and voluminous writings heralded a new stage for the international black movement against colonialism and racial oppression at the beginning of the twentieth century. Malcolm X's political praxis in the 1960s gave new meanings to notions of human rights and challenged the American liberal theory of rights.

By their political practices, all three figures collapsed the boundaries between political thought and political action. They were radical intellectuals who developed new political knowledge from a dialectical dialogue of lived experience and critical interpretation. This is a feature of the black radical intellectual tradition, where there is a radical hermeneutic of everyday experiences. Of such importance is this practice that it suggests to us a rethinking of the formulations about the relationships between political thought and political practice. Clearly, Malcolm X's thought on the relationship between human rights and civil rights, and Garvey's UNIA Manifesto for the black world, were not political *opinions* but political *knowledge* that raised foundational questions. Such a perspective debunks the idea expressed by the prominent political theorist John Dunn, that "The history of western political theory still for the present offers the richest resources available to human beings."<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

This book of essays is an attempt to probe the ideas and the meanings of the two streams of the black radical intellectual tradition: the heretic and the prophetic/redemptive. Although essentially a hermeneutical exercise, it will offer meditations on the implications for radical thought that emerge from this tradition. The study is an exercise in the history of ideas and political thought, but in its very performance asks the reader to do what Fanon's private prayer always was—"O my body, make of me always a man who questions."<sup>69</sup> The book's chapters will be organized around figures and a movement that represent each of the streams. My choice has been guided by the questions that the particular figure or movement raised, and their contributions to radical thought in general. I will examine the thought of Quobna Cugoana, Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Julius Nyerere, Walter Rodney, and Robert Marley. I will also examine the political philosophy of Rastafari.

Accounts of the present state of radical political thought are still embedded in a Western episteme that revolves around two historical events, the 1789 French Revolution and the 1917 Russian Revolution. Even those who proclaim the death of Eurocentrism still survey radical thought within these two historical exemplars. For example, Immanuel Wallerstein, in elaborating a left intellectual agenda for the twenty-first century, concedes that these two major historical moments and their conceptual histories have been the framing ones for radical thought, and *continue* to be so.<sup>70</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, while attempting to draw "a new global order, a new logic and structure of rule—in short, a new form of sovereignty,"<sup>71</sup> still remains within the confines of the epistemic silences of radical political thought.<sup>72</sup> All of these works indicate the deep hold that the established Western categories, as the *sole ones of any import*, have on political thought. Such a perspective is clearly a blinkered one. If this book opens a small space for the reader to grapple with another source of radical theories and practices about human emancipation, then it will have been worthwhile. The African-American poet Langston Hughes asked us "to sit and dream, to sit and read, to sit and learn about the world," and to help "make our world anew."<sup>73</sup> This has been the trajectory of the black radical intellectual tradition. It is about time we explored it. So now we begin. ...

# THE HERETICS

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