

Walter Rodney, African Studies, and the Study of Africa

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We believe that efforts to sustain African Studies as it has been historically constituted are bound to fail—and thus represent a very dangerous path to follow. Students and supporters of Africa would be well advised to think boldly and search for different paths. To move toward this requires rethinking the study of “Africa” and how it can be approached.

– Michael O. West and William G. Martin¹

Walter Rodney: An Intellectual and Biographical Sketch

Walter Rodney (1942–1980) was a Guyanese-born historian and social activist who established himself not only as a seminal figure in the scholarly study of Africa, but in the larger context of the history of political engagement in the pan-African world. Perhaps the most important aspect of Rodney’s life, among many, was his attempt to bring together these two components: academic writing and political commitment, which he understood as being inherently related and co-constitutive of the black freedom struggle worldwide. “And if I am an academic, and so long as I remain an academic, I must attempt to make the most important political input during those very many hours that I spend contributing to teaching or

¹ Michael O. West and William G. Martin, “A Future with a Past: Resurrecting the Study of Africa in the Post-Africanist Era,” *Africa Today*, Vol. XLIV, No. 3 (1997), p. 310.

researching or whatever other aspects of academic life come into play.”² A related hallmark of Rodney’s life was his embracing efforts to unify different groups of black people, whether in a national or global context. Toward these ends, he consistently sought to engage the widest possible audience through his teaching, public speaking, and political efforts, and by gearing some of his most well-known writings more toward the public than toward an exclusively academic readership.

Rodney was a pan-Africanist, which is to say that he saw an inherent connection between the peoples of African descent, a connection that was not based upon a fixed geography or even on skin tone, but upon a collective history and consciousness rooted in experiences of slavery, colonization, and oppression. Although his approaches and conceptual framework were shaped by older scholarly traditions and also constituted an important part of the nascent dependency school of the 1960s and 70s, Rodney’s work remained outside the mainstream of institutionalized knowledge concerning the study of Africa, which was entrenched within the Africanist tradition, the dominant approach to the study of the continent in both the United States and Europe during the Cold War era.

There was an important relationship between Rodney’s political outlook and the social movements taking place within the context of his lifetime. Indeed his biography was well-coordinated against a larger backdrop of social and political change.³ Most immediately, the earliest influence on Rodney’s political consciousness was related to his involvement, through his father, with the socialist politics of Guyana and the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) during the 1950s. “As a youngster, I was given the sort of humdrum task to distribute party manifestos which one doesn’t necessarily understand, but you come up against certain things ... After a while, without knowing anything about class, I knew there were certain kinds of Guyanese into whose yards you did not go carry a PPP manifesto.”⁴ From this entry into the politics of ordinary Guyanese people, Rodney quickly acquired a sense of political solidarity with the masses. “So, even before he entered his teens, Rodney was already engaged in leafletting,

² Walter Rodney, *Walter Rodney Speaks: The Making of an African Intellectual*, Trenton, New Jersey, Africa World Press, 1990, p. 35.

³ For more complete biographical information on Rodney see, among others: Rupert Lewis, *Walter Rodney’s Intellectual and Political Thought*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1998; Horace Campbell, “Walter Rodney: A Biography and Bibliography,” *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 18 (May–Aug., 1980), p. 132-137.

⁴ Rodney, *Walter Rodney Speaks*, p. 6.

attending party meetings and absorbing the thousands of hours of political discussions that went on in his home.”⁵ This deep “impulse toward socialism”, as Rodney would eventually call it, would remain evident throughout his political life and his scholarship.

Outside of Guyana, Rodney’s life coincided with two related historical conjunctures: first, the wave of national independence movements sweeping the former colonies of Europe in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. A child of the Second World War, Rodney’s political and intellectual maturation dovetailed with the emergence of new states and their nationalist independence movements, and with the concomitant demise of European colonialism. As will be seen, the relationship of European colonialism and the historical development—or “underdevelopment” of the colonies would be the basis of his most celebrated work. The second conjuncture that coincided with Rodney’s political and intellectual evolution was the civil rights movement in the United States. Though largely confined to the southern states in the immediate post-WWII period, by the middle of the 1960s the movement had transcended the South and was inherently related to a global consciousness that hinged upon the concept of black power.⁶ In short, the 1950s and 1960s, the era of Rodney’s intellectual formation, was a key moment in the larger history of the pan-African world. As Viola Bly has concluded, “Sensing the urgency of the historical currents, [Rodney] brought his academic skills to bear in formulating a practical analysis of the problems facing the Black world.”⁷

When Rodney arrived at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica (UWI), in 1960, as a result of his receiving a Guyanese state scholarship, he already possessed an acute political, social, and historical consciousness. During his three years at UWI, he not only excelled in his studies, but engaged in political organization. In 1962 he traveled to Cuba

⁵ Vincent Harding, Robert Hill, and William Strickland, “Introduction,” Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Washington, D.C., Howard University Press, 1981, p. xiii.

⁶ An especially useful book among the voluminous works on the civil rights movement is Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, New York, The Free Press, 1984. For writings pertaining to Black Power as it was being articulated in the United States, a useful starting point is Marvin E. Gettleman (ed.), *Black Protest: History, Documents, and Analyses*, Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1968. Gettleman’s volume contains the foundational texts by Malcolm X, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Ossie Davis, Stokely Carmichael, and the critique of Black Power by Bayard Rustin.

⁷ Viola Mattavous Bly, “Walter Rodney and Africa,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. XVI, No. 2 (1985), p. 117.

and also founded the Students Democratic Party in Jamaica. By the following year Rodney completed his studies with honors and received another scholarship to pursue a doctorate in History at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), a historic center for the institutionalized African Studies in the United Kingdom. During his subsequent time in London, Rodney met and studied with his greatest intellectual influence, the Caribbean Marxist historian C.L.R. James. James was one of three key influences in Rodney's approach to historical inquiry.

C.L.R. James (1901–1989) was the first to celebrate the history and significance of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the former slave who would lead the Haitian Revolution, which took place from 1791 through 1804. On the eve of the revolution, Haiti had been the jewel of the French colonial enterprise and the most profitable sugar colony in the world. In his groundbreaking book on the subject, published in 1938, James understood this event as foundational to the making of the modern world.⁸ James describes the Haitian slaves as agents in the shaping of their own destiny, acting as a conscious "proletariat", a term that had traditionally been reserved for the white working classes of industrialized Europe and North America.

The slaves worked on the land, and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any groups of workers in existence at that time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.⁹

With this turn of phrase, James not only stands many of the old historical assumptions of slave revolts on their head (namely that they are spontaneous and uncoordinated affairs), he also makes a leap forward in the use of Marxist ideas by applying them to the slave plantation. Prior to James, the Haitian Revolution had been neglected in the historical scholarship on the Age of Revolution. Indeed, as Michel Ralph Trouillot has argued, the revolution and subsequent creation of a black republic in the Caribbean, the bastion of New World slavery, was an "unthinkable" event: it was utterly

⁸ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, New York, Vintage Books, (1938) 1989. For more recent scholarship on the Haitian Revolution, see Carolyn E. Fick, *Making Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution From Below*, Knoxville, Tenn., University of Tennessee Press, 1990; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap, 2005; Barış Ünlü, "200. Yıldönümünde Haiti Devrimi", *Birikim*, v. 187 (Kasım, 2004), p. 92–103.

⁹ James, *Black Jacobins*, pp. 85–6.

incompatible with both the material and ideological framework of “enlightened” Europe.¹⁰ Years after its initial publication, James spoke of his aims in writing *The Black Jacobins*. “I was out to demonstrate that we had a history, and in that history there were men who were fully able to stand in comparison with great men of that period.”¹¹ Furthermore, for James, the implications of the Revolution went far beyond the confines of Haiti and the strictures of the 18th and 19th centuries; it had direct relevance for contemporary Africa.

But for the revolution, this extraordinary man [Toussaint L’Ouverture] and his band of gifted associates would have lived their lives as slaves, serving the commonplace creatures who owned them, standing barefooted and in rags to watch inflated little governors and mediocre officials from Europe pass by, as many a talented African stands in Africa today.¹²

From James, Rodney also acquired a respect for the historical agency and role of the masses during the transformative processes of social revolution. In his summary of the fate of Toussaint L’Ouverture, James argues that the slave-turned-statesman’s downfall stemmed from his refusal to break apart the large plantations, which had been the basis of the organization of slave labor, akin to the industrial factories of Victorian England. And in this decision, Toussaint made a “dreadful mistake ... neglect of his own people.”¹³

As remarkable as James’ work was, it did not stand alone during this period. There were other scholars, and two of particular importance in the context of the development of Walter Rodney’s intellectual heritage, who also brought together the history of the black world and pan-African agency with larger ideas about world-historical change. The first of these is W.E.B. DuBois, who published his monumental work on the aftermath of the American Civil War three years before the publication of *The Black Jacobins*.¹⁴ DuBois understood black slaves in the United States first as

¹⁰ Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1997, p. 70–107.

¹¹ C.L.R. James, “Lectures on the Black Jacobins,” *Small Axe*, No. 8 (September, 2000), p. 84.

¹² James, *Black Jacobins*, pp. 265.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 240.

¹⁴ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, New York, Touchstone (1935) 1995. By all accounts, James had not read DuBois prior to the publication of *The Black Jacobins*, yet the two books argue a similar conceptual point and are inextricably linked in the black radical tradition; see Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 69–94.

workers who consciously influenced the course of history by withdrawing their labor from the plantations during the critical moments of the Civil War in such a way as to have constituted a “general strike”.¹⁵ Here again, the significance of this way of framing history lies in the fact that the labor of black slaves is incorporated into the methodology of historical materialism. There is yet another key point made by DuBois, and this is perhaps more directly related to the intellectual development of Walter Rodney: that the enslavement of Africans was a key to the rise of Europe and to the development of global capitalism.

Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale ... new cities were built on the results of black labor ... It was thus the black worker, as founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world, who brought civil war to America.¹⁶

DuBois did not follow the observation –the concrete relationship between New World slavery and European “development”– at any great length, although this assertion was important in shaping the agendas of later historians, including Walter Rodney.

Leaving aside his later ventures into politics as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams is another significant figure in the scholarship on trans-Atlantic slavery and its relation to the rise of European capitalism, and the last such influence on Rodney to be discussed here. Published in 1944, the aptly named *Capitalism and Slavery* remains a key text, despite the fact that many of its central arguments have been challenged and/or overturned.¹⁷ Williams put forward three general arguments: first, that racism against black slaves was a consequence of their economic condition – in other words, that racism followed New World slavery, not vice versa; his second thesis concerned the role of the slave trade in fueling British industrialization; third, that slavery declined because it had lost much of its profitability. Seymour Drescher summarized the current consensus on the book on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its publication:

The debates of the past decade seem to have vindicated Williams’ insistence upon, if not his precise formulation of, the significance of slavery in the formation of the modern world economy. The narrow grounds of his own

¹⁵ DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 55–83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5, 15.

¹⁷ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, (1944) 1994.

arguments have been discarded or deepened in ways that neither his earliest enthusiasts nor detractors could have anticipated. Historians who once treated the overseas tropics as conceptually and empirically marginal to the long march of European development have grown used to treating the world beyond the line as a significant variable in the causal networks.¹⁸

Walter Rodney highlighted the significance of Williams' work upon his own thinking, commenting that "Williams was making points about what slavery and capitalism were about, and that these were both intellectually and emotionally appealing. One could recognize one's self in that history."¹⁹ In sum, during his time both at UWI and SOAS, Rodney was learning to build upon a foundation of knowledge and certain methodological and conceptual approaches that had been used to explore the linkages between the black world (including though certainly not limited to the African continent) and larger forces of global social change.

As a result of his political engagements Rodney never enjoyed the comforts that most professional historians would prefer as they write and conduct research. He was constantly threatened and harassed by state authorities and the forces of counter-revolution. When he joined the UWI faculty after completing his PhD, he was known to the authorities as a "pro-Castro" agitator and potential subversive –particularly so in the Jamaican context, where he sought to bring together the various segments of the Jamaican masses in the context of the international Black Power movement.²⁰

An outstanding feature of black power in Jamaica was its diffusiveness ... Jamaica, in this regard, differed from other societies in which black power gained relatively wide currency. In the United States, for instance, the Black Panther Party served as something of a national clearinghouse for black power, while the Black People's Convention and the National Joint Action Committee fulfilled similar functions in South Africa and Trinidad, respectively. In Jamaica, to the contrary, the various components of black power –Rastafarians of various stripes, religious rebels ..., urban youths, university students, and radical intellectuals– remained uncoordinated and unsynchronized on a national basis ... More than anything else, Rodney symbolized the potential for black power combination.²¹

¹⁸ Seymour Drescher, "Capitalism and Slavery after Fifty Years," *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. IXX, No. 3 (1997), p. 220.

¹⁹ Rodney, *Walter Rodney Speaks*, p. 14–5.

²⁰ For Rodney and the Rastafarians, see Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*, Trenton, New Jersey, Africa World Press, 1987, especially p. 128–133.

²¹ Michael O. West, "Walter Rodney and Black Power: Jamaican Intelligence and US Diplomacy," *African Journal of Criminology & Justice Studies*, Vol. 1, No.2 (2005), p. 20–1.

In 1968, Rodney (characterized as a threat to the tourism industry) was banned from Jamaica while he was out of the country attending the Black Writer's Conference. When he returned from Canada he was kept on the plane and sent on a return flight to Montreal. His banishment set off a series of riots in Kingston, which factored significantly in the downfall of Hugh Shearer's Jamaican Labour Party and helped to pave the way for the People's National Party of Michael Manley, who appealed to black Jamaicans through his lip service to the masses and his exploitation of Rastafarian symbols.²²

Equating his rival, Hugh Shearer, with the biblical figure Pharaoh, Manley likened himself to the biblical Joshua; and to complete the mockery of the beliefs of the people and his image as their redeemer, he walked around with an African walking stick which he called the "Rod of Correction" –claiming that it was given to him by Haile Selassie.²³

It was in this context that a short collection of Rodney's populist speeches were published as *The Groundings with My Brothers*.²⁴ The term "groundings" has its origins in the self-activity of slaves who sought to assert their own autonomy against various forms of oppression. It designated a space of self-determination: "Within Jamaican nation-language, 'ground' means a cultural, physical, and legal space that had been created by the slaves to grow their own food for consumption and local trade."²⁵ After his expulsion from Jamaica, Rodney went to Tanzania and rejoined the faculty at Dar es Salaam until 1972. In early 1974, after a series of job offerings and politically-tinged rejections,²⁶ he was offered a position as professor and chair of the History Department at the University of Guyana. In light of this turbulent history and his earlier expulsion from Jamaica, his new teaching post was a "victory for Walter and his supporters, a vindication of his vision."²⁷

²² See Michael O. West, "Seeing Darkly: Guyana, Black Power, and Walter Rodney's Expulsion from Jamaica," *Small Axe*, Vol. 1, No.2 (2008), pp. 93–104.

²³ Campbell, *op.cit.*, p. 136–7. Haile Selassie, or Ras Tafari Makonen, was the Ethiopian King who was of course both the symbolic figurehead and namesake of the Rastafarian movement.

²⁴ Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers*, London, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1969.

²⁵ Bogue, *Black Heretics*, pp. 128

²⁶ Nigel Westmaas, "1968 and the Social and Political Foundations and Impact of the 'New Politics' in Guyana," *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2009), pp. 116–7.

²⁷ Harding, Hill, and Strickland, "Introduction," *How Europe ...*, pp. xvii.

As Rodney was once again returning to the Caribbean in 1974, he participated in organizing the 6th Pan African Congress, which took place in Dar es Salaam in June of that year. The Pan African Congress (PAC) tradition remains an important part of the pan-African movement and the congresses have been convened at historically-pivotal moments since the first such international gathering took place in Paris in 1919.²⁸ The First PAC, organized by W.E.B. Du Bois, reflected the increasing level of pan-African politicization in the aftermath of the Great War. From the *Tirailleurs Algériens*, to the “New Negroes” who returned to the Caribbean and United States with new ideas about citizenship and equality and were greeted with rising levels of oppression (culminating in the Red Summer of 1919), the moment was central to the rising nationalist and internationalist consciousness in the pan-African world. The most recognizable and important development in this era was the rise of Marcus Garvey, who emerged to lead the first black social movement to operate on a global scale.²⁹ Later meetings of the Congress continued to address the most important issues of the day. The Fifth Pan African Congress for example, held in England in 1945, reflected the primary task of pan-Africanism at that particular historical moment: the defeat of European colonialism.³⁰ Indeed several leading figures of the national liberation movements, including future heads of state such as Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, attended the meetings in Manchester.

During his relationship with the 6th Pan African Congress (for which he ultimately withdrew his support) Rodney articulated his ideas on the relationship between colonialism and class relations, and the implications this relationship had for the development of national liberation movements. In this context he wrote that colonialism created the conditions whereby

the grievances of all social groups were expressed as ‘national’ grievances against the colonizers ... Understandably, [African political] leadership placed to the fore those ‘national’ aims which contributed most directly to the promotion of their own class interests; but they voiced sentiments which were

²⁸ See Immanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement*, London, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1974, pp. 229–262.

²⁹ There is a large literature on the Garvey movement and his organization the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Among others, see Jeffrey D. Howison, “‘Let Us Guide Our Own Destiny’: Rethinking the History of the Black Star Line,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 (2005), p. 29–50.

³⁰ Some of the documents of the Fifth PAC are available online. See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/1947/pan-african-congress/index.htm> (accessed April 2011).

historically progressive, partly because of their own confrontation with the colonialist and partly because of pressure from the masses.³¹

But during the process of national independence, Rodney understood that African political leadership had accepted the “Balkanization” of the continent in exchange for the solidification of their own power. “Throughout the continent, none of the successful independence movements denied the basic validity of the boundaries created a few decades ago by imperialism. To have done so would have been to issue a challenge so profound as to rule out the preservation of petty bourgeois interests.” Indeed one of Rodney’s convictions was that the “contemporary African state boundaries must be removed to make way for the genuine politico-economic unity of the continent.”³² In other words, that “The neutrality and unity of nationalism is illusory ... particular classes or strata capture nationalist movements and chart their ideological and political direction. Pan-Africanism today has to recognize such a situation, if it is to be a brand of revolutionary nationalism and if it is to be a progressive international force.”³³

Thus, the Sixth PAC convened during an era marked by the contradictions of African post-colonialism. “Not only did African states remain economically dependent on imperialist powers, Western-influenced regimes and corruption infiltrated many African governments, and black leadership in Africa did not fundamentally transform the effects of colonialism.”³⁴ The challenges related to the post-/neo-colonial situation would become the central theme and most controversial aspect of the Dar es Salaam meetings. One of the most practical manifestations of the issue involved who would be invited and recognized to participate in the proceedings. Heads of state would be celebrated as formal delegations, but the degree to which various anti-government or non-government organizations and movements would receive the same welcome was unclear.

³¹ Walter Rodney, “Towards the 6th Pan-African Congress: Aspects of the International Class Struggle in Africa, America and the Caribbean,” Molefi Asante (ed.), *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1996, p. 729–740. This document is available online at: <http://www.ghanansem.org/index.php> (accessed April, 2011). The quotations in this passage are taken from the online version of the essay, which lacks pagination. Therefore, page references have been omitted in this and the following two quotations.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ La TaSha Levy, “Remembering the Sixth-PAC: Interviews with Sylvia Hill and Judy Claude, Organizers of the Sixth Pan African Congress,” *The Black Scholar*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4 (Winter 2007), p. 40.

C.L.R. James, a participant of the 5th PAC, ultimately boycotted the Dar es Salaam meeting after it became apparent that leftist groups –particularly of the Caribbean– would be marginalized.³⁵ Ultimately, the 6th PAC became synonymous with “the triumph of ministry over movement and statecraft over struggle.”³⁶

In the years after the disappointment of the 6th PAC, Rodney continued his political activism in Guyana and helped to organize the Working People’s Alliance (WPA), a mass-based inter-racial group organized to “fight for an economy which will be controlled by the working people for their own benefit, in which every citizen has the right to work and in which exploitation and exploiting classes are abolished.”³⁷ The WPA transformed into a full-fledged political party in 1979 and set its sights on defeating the People’s National Congress of Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham, who had been the Guyanese Prime Minister since 1964. In July of 1979, Rodney and other WPA leaders were arrested and charged with arson in connection with a fire at a government building. After a brief trial of the “Referendum Five” in June of 1980 it was clear to many observers that the government lacked evidence to support the charges and the proceedings were adjourned shortly thereafter. During these months, WPA leaders were discriminately jailed, beaten, and even executed by pro-Burnham forces and the Guyanese police. The historians Vincent Harding, Robert Hill, and William Strickland describe Rodney’s final moments in their Introduction to his classic, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. They write,

One week after the adjournment, on Friday evening, June 13, Walter was sitting in his brother’s car, waiting for Donald Rodney at the driver’s seat. They had stopped at the house of a man who we now know had infiltrated the ranks of the WPA ... As they stood in the driveway of the infiltrator’s yard around 7:30 p.m., he told Rodney to drive off and wait for a test signal at 8:00 ... When the signal came, it turned out to be the explosion that ended Walter Rodney’s life.³⁸

³⁵ For a useful summary of the Sixth PAC, see David Austin, “Pan-Africanism, Caribbean Exile, and Post-Colonial Africa,” *Labour Law and Development Research Laboratory (LLDRL)*, McGill University Faculty of Law. Published online at: http://www.mcgill.ca/files/11drl/Austin_WP1.pdf (Accessed April 2011).

³⁶ West, “Seeing Darkly”, p. 101.

³⁷ Westmaas, “‘New Politics’ in Guyana”, p. 121.

³⁸ The infiltrator is widely recognized to have been Gregory Smith, who was, at the time, a sergeant in the Guyana Defence Force. Smith fled to French Guiana shortly after the assassination, changed his name to Cyril Johnson, and remained a fugitive after being formally charged with Rodney’s murder in 1996. Smith died in 2002. Quotation from Harding, Hill, and Strickland, “Introduction,” Rodney, *How Europe ...*, p. xx.

Walter Rodney's Scholarship on Africa

In light of the close relationship between Rodney's intellectual or "academic" writings and his political and social activism, the task of somehow narrowing the discussion in an attempt to isolate his scholarship from the world around him is problematic. As Bogue argues, "The temptation in any study of Walter Rodney's thought is to limit textual analysis to his more 'formal' academic writings ... and in particular his two pathbreaking books."³⁹ Other discussions of Rodney have attempted to show how his insights remain useful in the context of the neo-liberal world order.⁴⁰ Indeed, trying to summarize the "academic" work of Walter Rodney is difficult. Furthermore, in light of Rodney's emphasis on the interconnectedness of the black world and larger historical processes, it is also somewhat problematic to attempt to compartmentalize his writings "on Africa" from the rest of his work. But for the sake of manageability, and in light of these acknowledged risks, what follows is a thematic discussion of his two scholarly books which explicitly concern "African history". An emphasis will be placed upon Rodney's methodological and conceptual treatment of Africa and its people, in the broadest sense, in order to both flesh out the role of Africa in larger processes of world history and to illustrate how this can lead to useful approaches to the study of Africa in the post-African Studies era.

The influence of C.L.R. James can be seen in Rodney's dissertation, which was subsequently published in 1970 as *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545 to 1800 (HUGC)*.⁴¹ Just as James sought to demonstrate that "we had a history" in his study of the Haitian Revolution, Rodney approached his own project with the goal of "writing the history of Africa as such, and not as appendage to anything else."⁴² Whether Rodney was successful in portraying Africa "not as an appendage" remains debatable in light of the fact that the book shows the tremendous impact of European influence on West African people. Nevertheless, Rodney attempted to frame his analysis of West African history in opposition to the idea that Africa had been a "Dark Continent" prior to European colonization in the late 19th century and

³⁹ Bogue, *Black Heretics ...*, 126. The two books to which Bogue is referring are *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

⁴⁰ Dennis C. Canterbury, "The Politics of Walter Rodney in the Era of 'Globalization,'" *International Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2001), p. 179-199.

⁴¹ Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545 to 1800*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1970.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. viii.

he showed the impact of the slave trade in remaking social relations among West African peoples over the course of more than two centuries.

HUGC operates on the premise that the Upper Guinea Coast (the area roughly between Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire) was an autonomous and culturally unified region during the "proto-colonial period", the era prior to direct European political control, but during which time the Europeans were profiting from the trans-continental trading in slaves. But this regional integrity is not to imply that the region was socially homogeneous. Rodney emphasizes the "cleavage" of class inequality. "The noble was a social being apart from the masses of the people, and a recognition of this fact is basic for an understanding of much that occurred on the Upper Guinea Coast from 1545 to 1800."⁴³ Rodney describes this division with a Marxist vocabulary ("ruling class", "superstructure", etc.) while discussing the hierarchy of pre-capitalist African social life in contrast to colonialist scholars who portrayed the "tribes" as "traditional" communal societies based on "the principle of 'each according to his own need.'"⁴⁴

The primary theme of *HUGC* is the evolving relationship between West African society and the Europeans, as evidenced largely through the role of the *lancados*, the Portuguese traders who settled in West Africa while acting as a go-between for trading ships and the interior regions (markets) of Africa. The *lancados* were initially seen as "guests" and were welcomed with traditional "norms of hospitality". During the early period of these interactions, there was a general acceptance of the contracts and recognition of African customs, courts (*palavers*), and gift exchanges—although "gifts" from the Portuguese traders to the local rulers became increasingly compulsory. Initially, "broadly speaking, the *lancado* was asked to fit into the African way of life ... Whether the Afro-Portuguese relationship is to be called that of host and guest, partnership, or contract, the fact remained that the *lancados* had to recognize the laws of the land, and the will and sovereignty of the local rulers."⁴⁵

Over time, as the quest for more slaves became increasingly imperative, widespread, and profitable, the dynamics of West African societies began to change, as did the relationships between West African rulers and the Portuguese traders. Rodney's analysis of the proto-colonial period is devoted to understanding these changes and to grappling with the question of how such large numbers of African peoples were made available

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 37–38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84, 86–88, 106.

for shipment across the Atlantic. To begin to answer this question, Rodney shows the extent to which sections of the West African ruling class were actively involved in the trade for their own benefit. There was a certain “harmonization of the cupidity of all who stood to gain” through their participation in the slave trade.⁴⁶ In showing how West African social institutions and the actions of the ruling classes were largely determined by the Atlantic slave trade and presence of Europeans, Rodney deals with three subjects: the increasingly frequent “tribal” wars, West African legal institutions, and the rise of Islam in the region.

During the proto-colonial period, “most of the inter-group hostilities were motivated by and oriented towards the Atlantic slave trade”, while “no tribe was free from involvement in these hostilities ... None of these ‘wars’ was fought to gain territory or political dominance. Few of them arose out of tribal animosities.”⁴⁷ The corollary of this assertion is that the “inter-group hostilities” would not have occurred if the Europeans did not come into contact with the peoples of West Africa and that the various “tribal” wars of the proto-colonial period were directly attributable to the presence of Europeans. Rodney makes a similar argument with his treatment of West African legal institutions, arguing that these too shifted during this period as a consequence of contact with the Europeans and participation in the slaved trade. “At the same time, it is clear that customary law in Upper Guinea was functioning in a radically different way during the slave trade era than it did before and afterwards ... the customary laws were changing, especially with respect to the penalties imposed” –namely, that slave status was applied to an ever-widening range of people.⁴⁸ Finally, Rodney notes the role of religion, as many of the wars for slaves only *appeared* as Jihads because many West Africans simply converted to Islam in order to protect themselves against being sold or captured into slavery.

For those coastal chiefs who attached themselves to Islam and the Fulas, religion was both a screen and a shield. It was the practice of the Fula caravan leaders to utilize the annual trip to the coast as an opportunity for collecting tribute from chiefs and debts from traders. Those who could not pay were liable to be sold as slaves—unless they were Muslims. Thus...the Muslim elite of the eighteenth century was protecting its own persons and interests: this time under the cover of Islam, while the mass of people could be enslaved for want of well pronouncing ‘Shibboleth’.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103, 105.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106, 108.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

The point of the book, if it can be reduced to a single argument, is that the Upper Guinea Coast was a place that underwent profound changes because of its incorporation into the larger trans-Atlantic economy via the slave trade and European “proto-colonization” and that these factors make untenable any description of West African society as “traditional.” Rodney concludes, “Yet far too often there has been a ready acceptance of reports on West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as representing certain timeless institutions, and it is even assumed that field studies of ‘indigenous’ African societies in the twentieth century disclose a fundamentally unchanged pattern.”⁵⁰

Rodney continued to build upon the themes of his first work –the international nature of the proto-colonial and colonial eras, and how this inter-relatedness influenced the development of the regions and peoples involved– in his most well known and influential book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (HEUA)*, which was published in 1972 and written after Rodney’s exile from Jamaica while he was in Tanzania. The book, which has been widely read around the world, was first and foremost intended for Africans “who wish to explore further the nature of their exploitation” and who wish to better understand the historical path that was shaping post-colonial society. Rodney sets out to demonstrate that underdevelopment is quite different than a simple lack of development, noting that “underdevelopment is not the absence of development, because every people have developed in one way or another and to a great or lesser extent” at some point in human history.⁵¹ Instead, he defines underdevelopment as a relational process, with the social and economic condition of Africa appearing as the flip-side, indeed as the foundation, of the development or more “advanced” economies and states, namely those in Europe. In other words, the idea of social and economic “development”, far from being a stadial or linear process, is in fact predicated upon the concurrent existence of various forms of development around the world; simply, you can’t have one without the other.

Mistaken interpretations of the causes of underdevelopment usually stem either from prejudiced thinking or from the error of believing that one can learn the answers by looking inside the underdeveloped economy. The true explanation lies in seeking out the relationship between Africa and certain developed countries and in recognizing that it is a relationship of exploitation.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

⁵¹ Rodney, *How Europe ...*, p. 13

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

From this assumption, Rodney charts African history –using examples from as far back as two millennia, but with a focus upon the colonial era– to show how the continent was negatively influenced through its relationships with various European societies. In this light, Rodney contributed to the development of dependency theory, building upon theorists such as Andre Gunder Frank,⁵³ but also to the rise of world-systems analysis, whose origins can be traced to the publication of the first volume of Immanuel Wallerstein’s monumental project two years after the appearance of *HEUA*.⁵⁴ In fact, Wallerstein was a vocal supporter of Rodney’s work. In a review article, published some years after Rodney’s death, Wallerstein reflected on the contributions of *HEUA*, and noted that the book stood apart from Rodney’s other projects “in style, though not in intellectual content.” He continues,

It is not based on archival sources, has no footnotes, and offers short annotated notes instead of a bibliography. It is openly didactic, and its intended audience is clearly university students and educated persons generally in Africa, and their friends and counterparts elsewhere.⁵⁵

Wallerstein’s observation on the style, as well as the lack of footnotes and archival sources deserves further examination because it gets to the heart of some of the most widespread criticisms of the book: namely, that there is a lot to be desired in terms of how evidence is used to substantiate the arguments.

For example, in the discussions about the role of slavery in distorting West African economic and social development, Rodney raises the issue of the profitability of slavery, which has been a contentious issue in the historiography of the triangular trade. Instead of providing instances of how the profitability of slavery has been understood in the historiography, Rodney dismisses the point outright, along with any who might suggest otherwise. “A few bourgeois scholars have suggested that the trade in slaves did not have worthwhile monetary returns ... This kind of argument is worth noting more as an example of the distortions of which white bourgeois

⁵³ Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1967.

⁵⁴ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, Vol. I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, Academic Press, 1974.

⁵⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein, “Walter Rodney: The Historian as Spokesman for Historical Forces,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1986), p. 330.

scholarship is capable than as something requiring serious attention.”⁵⁶ Similarly, in his discussion of the role of population loss as a factor in the underdevelopment of West Africa, Rodney again makes a moral, rather than scientific argument, and more concrete information would likely have pacified the professional historical community.⁵⁷ As one reviewer noted, in reference to Rodney’s analysis of the disastrous effects of colonialism for Africa’s development, such moralism, although it served Rodney’s polemical purposes, tended to put off professional historians. “For Africanists, most of whom do not defend colonial rule, much of this is like thrashing a dead dog.”⁵⁸

A comparable point has been raised in different reviews of *HEUA* concerning the destruction of handicrafts in Africa as a result of the influx of manufactured goods from Europe, which Rodney argues also contributed to the continent’s underdevelopment and stagnation, particularly during the colonial era. “Although Rodney may in fact be correct for some areas and for some crafts, the substantiating data ... would tell us when such craft destruction occurred...” In another review, the same issue is raised in more detail. “Here, in addition to a lack of systematic chronology, we are left with description rather than explanation. When, and why, did this [handicraft] occur? After all, in Europe, the domination and transformation of such forms of production was one of the factors in the emergence of capitalism and the factory system.”⁵⁹ For Rodney, the issue of handicraft destruction is summarized as “destruction without redress”, that is, the factory system was deliberately withheld from Africa because “the machinery and skills... would have given competition to European industry.”⁶⁰ So although Rodney does

⁵⁶ Rodney, *How Europe ...*, p. 83. There is a long standing debate and a deep historical literature concerning over the profitability of New World slavery fueled the growth of the European economies, and most specifically English industrialization. Here Rodney is referring to the slave trade rather than to the slave colonies, but more generally, there is no historical consensus on the role of Africa (or the “periphery” more generally) on European development. For one of the more influential articles that argues against the colonies as a factor in the rise of Europe, see P.K. O’Brien, “Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery,” *Economic History Review*, Vol. XXXV, No. 1 (February, 1985), p. 1–18.

⁵⁷ Rodney, *How Europe*, pp. 96–98.

⁵⁸ Martin A. Klein, “Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1974), p. 327.

⁵⁹ Martin Legassick, “Review Article: Perspectives on African ‘Underdevelopment’,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. XVII, No. 3 (1976), p. 438; Robert Shenton, “Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1975), p. 149.

⁶⁰ Rodney, *How Europe ...*, pp. 232.

offer explanations for many of the arguments he makes in the book, they are not explanations that the community of historians found satisfactory.

But the overall reception of *HEUA* was one that questioned the format and tone of the work, but relatively little of its substance. It is true that a more formal works cited list would have made it easier for historians and students to follow up on the arguments that Rodney was making, but considering the purpose and intended audience Rodney had in mind when he wrote the book, that criticism becomes somewhat irrelevant. If anything, bearing in mind that the book was written under conditions that were not conducive to the most rigorous academic writing, and considering that Rodney was both in exile and that it was written in a relatively short period of time, what is striking is how the book has withstood the test of time. Indeed it remains not only a key text in only in the black radical tradition, but was also important in the rise of the dependency school and is therefore also strongly related to the rise of world-systems analysis during the 1970s and 80s. Indeed, even those who were sharply critical of the book's style nevertheless saw it as a "major work of synthesis."⁶¹

Walter Rodney and the Future of the Study of Africa

The prevailing approach to the study of Africa has passed through (at least) two eras. The first, from roughly the end of the 19th century through the conclusion of the Second World War, was dominated by Anthropology and was inherently related to the project of European colonialism. During this period, as Immanuel Wallerstein has written, the study of Africa was largely monopolized by anthropologists who conducted their fieldwork among the various "tribes". Those conducting the research were not only exclusively European, but were generally "of the nationality of the governing colonial power ... In political terms, the anthropologists of this period were essentially secular missionaries, liberal mediators between the tribe and the Colonial Office (plus metropolitan public opinion)."⁶² With the post-WWII breakdown of European colonialism in the face of national independence movements, the political and economic foundation of this approach soon dissolved and there subsequently emerged a new paradigm that would supersede the anthropologists of the colonial period.

⁶¹ Klein, "Walter Rodney", pp. 328.

⁶² Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Evolving Role of the Africa Scholar in African Studies," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. XVII (1983), No. 1, p. 10–11.

After the conclusion of the Second World War, the dominant scholarship on Africa took its institutional form through African Studies programs, which emerged rather suddenly in the context of post-colonialism amid the Cold War rivalry over the fate of the newly independent states. In the context of the United States, there was a clear relationship between American power on a global scale and the institutionalized production of knowledge. This concerned

peoples and cultures hitherto of little interest to the U.S. government ... In the case of African Studies, the relationship was quite direct: Sputnik launched a fear and loathing of Soviet expansionism, which led in turn to a rapid acceleration of funds from private and federal funders—all of whom were vociferous in the need to counter the communist threat in Africa. The result was nothing less than a scramble for trusted scholars and programs with research funds, promotion, and publication eagerly provided.⁶³

African Studies in Europe also underwent a post-1945 transition. But whereas in the United States the study of Africa was shaped by anti-communism, the *raison d'être* of European—and particularly British African Studies—concerned easing the transition “from empire to independence.”⁶⁴

One of the defining features of this “Africanist” project, as it has been called in both American and European contexts, was a narrowing of the scope and substance of the objects of inquiry and conceptualization of African peoples and their history. To begin with, Africa, as conceived by the “Africanists” (those who have dominated African Studies programs) generally referred to *Sub-Saharan* Africa: “Gone were the competing colonial systems and boundaries ... in their place emerged new world regions, marked not by the boundary lines of competing empires filled with natives and tribes, but by geostrategic regions as defined by the U.S. government—and filled with pro- or anti-communist states.”⁶⁵ The northern African states were likewise incorporated into the “area studies” of the Middle East and Muslim world. Additionally, African Studies in the United States, epitomized by the African Studies Association (ASA, founded in 1957), further limited the scope of historical and social inquiry both through a conceptual divorcing of the pan-African diaspora from the African

⁶³ West & Martin, “A Future with a Past ...,” p. 312.

⁶⁴ Christopher Fyfe, “The Emergence and Evolution of African Studies in the United Kingdom,” Michael O. West & William G. Martin (eds.), *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Meaning and Study of Africa*, Urbana, Ill., 1999, University of Illinois Press, p. 56.

⁶⁵ West & Martin, *op.cit.*, p. 313.

continent and through the exclusion of those scholars who did not conform to this particular vision of Africa.

Almost without exception, black scholars of Africa and the broad pan African intellectual tradition they represented were rejected in favor of the Africanist bantustan policy, which involved constructing a wide, exaggerated division between the African continent and the diaspora. Two generations of graduate students were brought up on a historiography that placed the Tarzans of the Africanist world at the center of discovery. Historical knowledge did not really exist before their arrival and approval.⁶⁶

This institutionalized exclusion covered intellectuals from the pan-African and black radical traditions such as C.L.R. James and W.E.B. DuBois, both of whom figured prominently in the intellectual lineage of Walter Rodney. In other words, African Studies took “two steps backward” from earlier traditions of scholarship of the African world.

Although African Studies thus stood in contrast from the earlier period dominated by Anthropology, there remained a common denominator: those at the heads of the departments were generally non-African, white researchers. Indeed, African Studies has always been haunted by the persistence of institutionalized racism within the departments that have composed it. In 1969 for example, a group of black scholars broke ranks with the ASA and denounced it as a racist institution while calling into question its social and political relevance. They charged that it was perpetually controlled by whites and that black intellectuals had been systematically kept not only from leadership positions but from resources such as lucrative research grants. Furthermore, they condemned the relationship between the ASA and the foreign policy goals of the American state, including but not limited to the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency.⁶⁷

The racial dynamic again embroiled the ASA during the mid-1990s in the notorious “Curtain Affair”. In 1995, Philip D. Curtain, distinguished professor of African Studies at Johns Hopkins University, published a now infamous editorial in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “Ghettoizing African History”. Curtain, capturing the larger debates on Affirmative Action taking place in American society during the 1990s,

⁶⁶ David Johnson, “Drawing a Curtain on African Studies,” *Association of Concerned African Scholars Bulletin*, No. 46 (Winter 1996), p. 32. Online at <http://concernedafricascholars.org/docs/acasbulletin46.pdf> (accessed March, 2011).

⁶⁷ The events of the Montreal meeting are retold in Peter Gutkind, “Montreal in 1969: A Personal View”, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. X, No. 1/2 (Spring–Summer, 1980), p. 62–65. See also Wallerstein, “Evolving Role of the Africa Scholar ...,” p. 14–15.

charged that academic positions in African Studies programs were increasingly being given to black academics –and what’s more, that these appointments were made on the basis of skin color rather than on the basis of professional qualification. He wrote,

This strategy ghettoizes African history, by making the field an enclave within the university set aside for black scholars ... This form of intellectual apartheid has been around for several decades but it appears to have become more serious in the past few years, to the extent that white scholars trained in African history now have a hard time finding jobs ... We need to guard against the often-unconscious racism that has pushed black scholars into academic ghettos.⁶⁸

Curtain’s essay set off a firestorm of criticism. Scholars of Africa from around the world argued that Curtain’s editorial was, at best, a thoughtless and unsubstantiated set of claims made through a series of inappropriate metaphors, images, and choices of words; at worst it was seen as a racist and reactionary monologue of a scholar –as representative of an entire field– that had lost any remaining relevance or credibility he (and it) may once have had.

The study of Africa is currently undergoing another process of transformation, which is taking place on at least two fronts. First, the post-Cold War geopolitical order defined largely by the decline of the United States and concomitant rise of developing nations as new loci of power is increasingly reflected in the scholarly attention received by Africa. Second, institutions of higher education, especially those in the United States, which have been targets of neoliberal restructuring for several decades, are experiencing deep cuts and reorganizations most recently associated with the ongoing global financial crisis. The social sciences –including “area” programs relating to the study of Africa– are being especially hard hit.

But these changes also create new opportunities for the creative growth and rebirth of the study of Africa, and one place where the opportunity appears particularly rich is in Turkey, which has been steadily “opening to Africa” since the late 1990s.⁶⁹ As one indicator of this trend, the number of Turkish embassies in Africa has doubled (to a current total of 22)

⁶⁸ Curtain’s original essay and various responses are contained in “The Ghettoization Debate: Africa, Africans, and African Studies,” *Association of Concerned African Scholars Bulletin*, No. 46 (Winter 1996), p. 1–43. Online at <http://concernedafricascholars.org/docs/acasbulletin46.pdf> (accessed March, 2011). Curtin’s piece was first published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, on March 3, 1995.

⁶⁹ Mehmet Özkan & Birol Akgün, “Turkey’s Opening to Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2010), p. 525–6.

in only the last six years. The 2008 Turkey–Africa Cooperation Summit, which announced that “Turkey is determined to improve and develop its political, economic and cultural interaction with African countries,” also highlighted this new interest.⁷⁰ Of course, the principle motivations for this development have been economic and political rather than intellectual. The scholarly aspect in Turkey has thus far lagged substantially behind. But where there is an interest, there are also opportunities for scholars.

And if there is to be an intellectual opening to accompany the larger Turkish awakening to Africa, we must not repeat the mistakes of the Africanist past –the conceptual narrowing and institutionalized exclusions that defined both the Anthropological and African Studies eras. Instead, we must work toward a politically-relevant approach to Africa and to African people worldwide –one that would do well to bridge local / national conditions and histories with larger world-historical processes. Additionally, this pursuit should remain socially and politically relevant, not only for the economic and political elites and scholarly audiences, but “grounded” with the histories, conditions, and problems of the masses of ordinary people. In short, as we help to remake the study of Africa, we would do well to reflect on the life and work of Walter Rodney, and to recall some of the lessons he has taught us.

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⁷⁰ See <http://africa.mfa.gov.tr/default.en.mfa> (accessed April, 2011).

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