Killing the Black Body: Reflections on Robert Hill's "Walter Rodney and the Restatement of Pan-Africanism"

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Presented for the first time in the wake of Rodney's assassination,[1] Robert Hill's "Walter Rodney and the Restatement of Pan-Africanism in Theory and Practice," explored Rodney's commitment to the struggle of Black peoples and the broader currents of Pan-Africanism that had spread across Africa and the Americas during the first half of the 1970s.[2] Centering on Rodney's trenchant critique of African and Caribbean postcolonial power holders in his presentation at the Sixth Pan-African Congress in Dar es Salaam in 1974, Hill's analysis of Rodney's thought and action seems particularly prescient today. My point here is not to draw an equivalence between Pan-Africanism as a specific historical project and "Black" or "African" sensibilities, stances or identities but to chart how we may be able use the conceptual tensions among these terms for meaningful historical inquiry and political action. Violence against the Black body continues as a ubiquitous feature of our present moment, and the specific material links that provide meaningful narratives of persistent attack and subjugation continue to be disarticulated, silenced, and forgotten.[3]

Rodney's Pan-Africanism, Hill argues, was the product of a powerful "synthesis" of his commitment to historical scholarship and a "profound commitment . . . to participation in concrete movements of the people."[4] Historical inquiry provided depth and direction to Rodney's political commitment. The dialogue between the history of colonialism in Africa and the Americas and the contemporary experience of transnational capitalism structured his radical Marxism. Instead of fixating on abstract sentiments of "mystical racial union,"[5] Rodney grounded his Pan-Africanism in identifiable material historical circumstances: "[t]he dialectic by which black struggle in one particular domain illuminated and inspired struggle in other scattered domains of the black experience, and in the course of which certain practical experiences and resources of struggle have been transferred between different

fronts of struggle."[6] "The struggle in actual practice" provided the necessary rupture from normative structures of power and provided the "primary conditioning" and the "consciousness" required for radical projects of transformation.[7]

Placing himself within the radical Guyanese tradition of Norman Eustace Cameron and Eusi Kwayana, Rodney activated the Guyanese past in the global struggle for liberation.[8] Initial desires to deepen his own knowledge of the "hidden dimension" in Caribbean history propelled Rodney toward a systematic study of the African colonial and precolonial past. The process forced him to be a relentless critic of postcolonial economic and political power holders and an uncompromising proponent of "Pan-Africanism as an analytical and methodological variable of intervention in the process of struggle."[9] Returning to Guyana from Tanzania in 1974, Rodney critiqued the use of Pan-African solidarity to support a repressive neocolonial State.[10] To advocate for a radical process of socio-political transformation, he drew from the Guyanese history of popular multi-racial struggle that included Indo-Guyanese and not from the chauvinistic constructions of Blackness that had been propagated by the primarily Afro-Guyanese ruling Party, the Peoples' National Congress (PNC).[11] While the current tactical value of Pan-Africanism as a strictly socialist vision may be debated, the ethical core of Rodney and Hill's invocation—Pan-Africanism's radical potential as a methodology for liberation—remains painfully relevant.

Just as Rodney's life seemed to embody the radical potential of Pan-Africanism, his death on June 13, 1980 seemed a harbinger of its demise in the final decades of the twentieth century. By the 1980s, Black Power had come under extreme assault in the United States and abroad. The machinations of the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) revealed dramatically the extent to which its internationalist ethic and radical critique of institutional racist and capitalist power threatened the interests of the State. Undergirded by a "neoliberal consensus," U.S. and European powers extended and intensified their engagements in Latin America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and Africa; Nicaragua, Grenada, Cambodia, South Africa, and Angola emerged as particularly insidious cases of neo-imperial involvement and seemed to herald grim futures for projects of radical liberation in the Global South. Black peoples across the globe turned towards

hagiography to remember their struggles,[12] and the promise of transcending the legacies of slavery and colonialism appeared to dissipate as transnational struggles for liberation descended into devastating wars of fortune.

If Hill's resuscitation of Rodney's Pan-Africanist spirit in the aftermath of his death provided a path to recenter thought and action in a period of extreme assault in the 1980s,[13] it is even more crucial now. In 2013, the Government of Guyana finally agreed to the Rodney family's demands to establish an Inquiry. While the Government's public hearings of personal testimony and archival evidence over the past year have fixated on confirming the "truth" of the Afro-Guyanese PNC State's direct involvement in the assassination,[14] the Indo-Guyanese Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP) continues the Guyanese State's historical assault on the Black body.[15] From 1992 till the present, the PPP has controlled Guyana. To maintain power, it has strategically capitalized on currents of ethno-racial insecurity sustained by memories of violence and deprivation during the PNC's rule. Materially, more than 350 young black men have been killed in Guyana over the past fifteen years with little, if any, investigation into their deaths or recourse for their families and communities. On March 11, 2015, two months before national elections, Guyana witnessed the dramatic extrajudicial killing of voting rights activist, Courtney Crum-Ewing, many attributing direct responsibility to the PPP in orchestrating the murder.[16]

In the United States, the persistent shootings of unarmed black youth at the hands of the "neighborhood watch" and the police have ignited protests across the country. They have placed in high relief the institutional processes of subjugation and dehumanization that have structured Black experiences in the Americas for six centuries.[17] Only two days after the U.S. Department of Justice cleared officer Darren Wilson of civil rights violations in shooting Michael Brown in Ferguson, on March 6, 2015, police shot and killed another unarmed black youth—Tony Robinson—this time blocks away from my home in Madison. On April 19, 2015, Freddy Grey finally succumbed to his gruesome injuries: a virtually severed spine and crushed vocal box, products of an illegal arrest and astounding neglect. Rebellion broke out in the streets of Baltimore, and what was urgently presented as a

public plea for non-violence seemed more like a call for order and submission.[18]

Inclusion of the African continent in our narrative further troubles our ability to construct simple equivalencies of experience while simultaneously underscoring the analytical importance of understanding the struggle *with* and *against* violence as central to any project of radical liberation. Across the globe, the economic poor continue to define the boundaries of the State's monopoly over violence. To take seriously Pan-Africanism as a methodology of liberation, "no matter how apparently localized [specific struggles] seem,"[19] is to militantly resist the forces of narrative disaggregation of the capitalist historical project. A Pan-African history of popular struggle against violence allows us to re-examine the relationships between ethnic and religious violence amongst African peoples in dialogue with African State projects of exclusion and their tremendous investments in the Global North's technologies of war and repression.[20] How far are these conduits of terror from those that sustain the global war against drugs and propagate the mass incarceration of Black peoples across the Americas? Today, it is from this position of drawing together the experiences of sustained violence against Black bodies that Rodney and Hill's Pan-Africanism seems not only most urgent but also most liberating.

Notes

1 On June 13, 1980 in Georgetown, Guyana.

2 Robert Hill, "Walter Rodney and the Restatement of Pan-Africanism," in *Walter Rodney, Revolutionary and Scholar: A Tribute,* eds. Edward Alpers and Pierre-Michel Fontaine (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Afro-American studies and African Studies Centers, UCLA, 1982): 77-97. Robert Hill's piece first appeared in 1981 as part of a symposium held as a tribute to Walter Rodney's life and work, hosted by UCLA's Center for African Studies. I want to thank Fernanda Villarroel, Elena McGrath, Dr. Robert Hill, Dr. Nigel Westmaas, Dr. Rupert Roopnaraine, and Dr. Francisco Scarano for their comments.

3 My use of the term *Black body* draws on Achille Mbembe's discussion of sovereignty and violence in Achille Mbembe and Libby Meintjes, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40, and resonates with Malcolm X's hermeneutics, where the term "*negro*" is derived from *"necro*" (Greek for death). Implicit in my analysis is an understanding of *Black* as an inclusive political

stance—one that does not distinguish based on skin tone but rather the experience of extreme subjugation and violence, products and producers of the history of colonialism and slavery.

[4] Hill, 79.

[5] Ibid., 80.

[6] Ibid., 80.

[7] Ibid., 80.

[8] Hill, 83. A Cambridge-educated mathematician and school headmaster in Guyana, Norman Eustace Cameron composed his *Evolution of the Negro*, published in two volumes, (Georgetown, British Guiana: The Argosy Co. Ltd., 1929, 1934) in response to the absence of literature that traced the African precolonial past to life on the Guyanese plantations. Cameron, however, remained an observer of Guyanese anti-colonial and working peoples' politics of the 1940s and 1950s. While also a school teacher, Eusi Kwayana demonstrated a far more radical political and intellectual commitment to working peoples than Cameron. Although a founding member of both the Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP, 1950) and the Peoples' National Congress (PNC, 1957) in Guyana, Kwayana proved too radical for the national political parties in Guyana. Indeed, in the late 1950s and early 1960s Kwayana helped bring together the radical currents of Black internationalism and Pan-Africanism as they were felt and expressed in Guyana by helping found the African Society for Racial Equality and later the African Society for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa (ASRE, 1958 and ASCRIA, 1964). In 1974, ASCRIA became one of the principle feeder organizations for the Working Peoples Alliance (WPA), Kwayana and Rodney becoming critical vectors against the struggle against authoritarian violence of the PNC. While there is still very little written on Kwayana (and even less on Cameron), recently Nigel Westmaas' chapter "An Organic Activist: Eusi Kwayana, Guyana and Global Pan-Africanism" along with the rest of the essays in *Black Power in the Caribbean,* edited by Kate Quinn (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014) provide an important step in fleshing out these less studied currents in intellectual history of Black and (Pan)Africanist thought.

[9] Hill, 85.

[10] Forbes Burnham, leader of the primarily Afro-Guyanese Peoples' National Congress party (PNC), had strategically embraced currents of Pan-Africanism and Black Power, gaining credibility in the Black and Non-Aligned world. He and the PNC vehemently denounced Apartheid in South Africa, supported independent African and other third-world leaders, facilitated the Cuban struggle in Angola, and provided asylum for Black Power activists escaping the U.S. State.

[11] See Walter Rodney, A *History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

[12] For a powerful discussion of how radicalism came to be stripped from the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

Press, 2005). For a related discussion regarding the meaning and construction of Blackness in Jamaica, see Deborah Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2004).

[13] Notably in 1980, the National Black United Front (NBUF), despite the reactionary tide in U.S. politics, provided a new articulation of Black Power grounded in local and community movements against police brutality and anti-black vigilantism.

[14] A truth that had been all but confirmed in the months following his death.

[15] On May 11, 2015, however, A Partnership for National Unity (APNU) defeated the PPP in Guyanese National Elections, marking the first time since 1953 that a multi-racial coalition has been elected to govern the country.

[16] "Thousands Bid Farewell to Courtney Crum-Ewing," *Kaieteur News*, accessed April 10, 2015, http://www.kaieteurnewsonline.com/2015/03/19/thousands-bid-farewell-to-courtney-crum-ewing/.

[17] Take for example, the deaths Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012 and of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014.

[18] On the troubling narrative of non-violence see: Ta Nehesi-Coates, "Nonviolence as Compliance," *The Atlantic,* April 27, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/nonviolence-as-compliance/391640/

[19] Hill, 80.

[20] In the past year military spending in Africa grew by 8.3 percent, faster than in any other part of the world: "Angola's defence budget increasing by 2013, to $6 billion, overtaking South Africa as the biggest spender in sub-Saharan Africa." See "Arms and the African,"" *The Economist*, November 22, 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21633901-continents-armies-are-going-spending-spree-arms-and-african?zid=304&ah=e5690753dc78ce91909083042ad12e30.