# Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora

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P eople of African descent have often been depicted as the antithesis of Western modernity and modern subjectivity. There is an ample, if sometimes frustrating, literature written by both Western and non-Western scholars that attests, purposely or not, to this depiction. I am not interested, however, in adding to this vast heap of documentation in an effort to prove or disprove the absolute villainy of the West; nor am I preoccupied with displaying the unqualified humanity of people of African descent. This article seeks to respond to the following question: How and in what ways have African-descended peoples been modern subjects?

My interest in the relationship between the discourses, institutions, norms, and practices of modernity and people of African descent has been motivated by the belief that virtually all discussions and literatures pertaining to people of African descent, ranging from black nationalism to Pan-Africanism, to anticolonialism and civil rights, are undergirded by premises of and reactions to some notion or practice of modernity. Whether in the form of the nation-state or universal ideas about human rights, black nationalism, and racial as well as other modes of collective identity have invariably reacted against or innovated upon discourses of modernity. Virtually all transnational black movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have utilized ideas about racial selfhood and collective identity, capitalism and socialism, justice and democracy that emerged as the economic, political, normative, religious, and cultural consequences of the epoch in which they lived. Unlike the Middle Ages, wherein neither peasants nor serfs could use

the language of Calvinist predetermination, divine right, natural law, or monarchy to upend conditions of inequality, the era of the industrial, French, and U.S. revolutions provided the conditions for the critique of their subordinated condition. Marx recognized a key paradox of the modern age in the formation of an industrial proletariat. The socioeconomic and political conditions which would lead to its formation would also nurture the preconditions for its dissatisfaction with the very mode of production that brought it into being. Similarly, only under conditions of modernity could people defined as African utilize the very mechanisms of their subordination for their liberation.

African diaspora scholarship is dominated by two tendencies: the Herskovitzean model, which focuses on African residuals in culture and language, bodily and figurative arts;[1] and what I call the mobilizational model—studies that have focused on resistance, overt as well as veiled (song, dance, slave revolts, postemancipation rebellions, or civil rights movements). As John Thornton, Basil Davidson, and others have demonstrated, there has been a popular and academic tendency to diminish, deny, or neglect the impact that African peoples, practices, and civilizations have had on the West's development, as well as to forget the extent to which these populations have sought paths that have veered away from Western modernities even while being interlocked with them.[2] Both models invariably encompass the forces of technology and the Industrial Revolution, the Middle Passage, racial slavery, and colonial plunder as irrefutable evidence of Africa's contributions to the West.

These facets of Africa's and the African diaspora's history are certainly indispensable. Yet these are not the only categories of engagement that involve people of African descent and the West after the fifteenth century. Equally if not more important have been the means by which various African-descended populations and political actors consulted one another to devise political responses to their collective subordination. Thus, their reactions to slavery, racism, capitalism, and cultural imperialism should be seen not as responding to isolated institutions and practices but to a broader array of forces.

In his work on the political culture of the African diaspora, Paul Gilroy has argued that Afro-Modernism and the black Atlantic represents a counterculture

1. See Melville J. Herskovitz, *The New World Negro: Selected papers in Afroamerican Studies*, ed. Frances Herskovitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

2. See John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York: Times Books, 1992).

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of modernity.[3] Perhaps more than any other contemporary theorist, Gilroy has attempted to problematize the African diaspora's relationship to the West. Gilroy's theorizing begs even more fundamental questions about the nexus of the African diaspora and the West; if Afro-Modernism is a counterculture of modernity, as Gilroy suggests, is it merely an appendage of Western modernity and European modernism? Is its existence to be defined solely in terms of its critique of the West, or does its presence hint at one of several divergent paths of modernity?

What I shall call Afro-Modernity represents a particular understanding of modernity and modern subjectivity among people of African descent. At its broadest parameters, it consists of the selective incorporation of technologies, discourses, and institutions of the modern West within the cultural and political practices of African-derived peoples to create a form of relatively autonomous modernity distinct from its counterparts of Western Europe and North America. It is no mere mimicry of Western modernity but an innovation upon its precepts, forces, and features. Its contours have arisen from the encounters between people of African descent and Western colonialism not only on the African continent but also in the New World, Asia, and ultimately Europe itself.

Marshall Berman has suggested that the world historical processes of modernism and modernization "have nourished an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own."[4] Dialectically, Afro-Modernity can be seen as the negation of the idea of African and African-derived peoples as the antithesis of modernity. Gilroy has suggested that "the cultures of diaspora blacks can be profitably interpreted as expressions of and commentaries upon ambivalences generated by modernity and their locations in it."[5]

Such expressions and commentary are more than responses to the Middle Passage and racial slavery. They are responses to the age and the technological, normative, and societal conditions that made the Middle Passage and racial slavery possible. Consequently, the responses of Afro-Modern subjects to their enslavement, servitude, and derogation helped constitute politics among people of African descent and their desire to render possible conditions that were qualitatively

3. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

4. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 16.

5. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 117.

superior to those they found themselves in. As a self-conscious political and cultural project, Afro-Modernity is evidenced in the *normative convergence* of two or more African and African-descended peoples and social movements in response to perceived commonalties of oppression. Afro-Modern politics are characterized by (a) a supranational formulation of people of African descent as an "imagined community" that is not territorially demarcated but based on the shared belief in the commonalties of Western oppression experienced by African and African-derived peoples; (b) the development of alternative political and cultural networks across national-state boundaries; and (c) an explicit critique of the uneven application of the discourses of the Enlightenment and processes of modernization by the West, along with those discourses' attendant notions of sovereignty and citizenship.

Events and movements that exemplify the normative convergences of Afro-Modern politics include (but are not restricted to) Afro–New World activists involved in the abolitionist movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Friends of Abyssinia Movement (a response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia), Caribbean independence movements, the antiapartheid movement, and, most recently, continental and diaspora critiques of the sustained authoritarian regimes of Kenya and Nigeria. In the absence of nation-state power and territorial sovereignty, Afro-Modern political actors have often utilized a combination of domestic and international institutions to redress situations of inequality for specific African-descended populations, much in the way that Jewish transnational political actors have operated on behalf of Jewish populations throughout the world.

As Gilroy has noted, Afro-diasporic consciousness grew out of the nation-state's neglects and exclusions, since "the African diaspora's consciousness of itself has been defined in and against constricting national boundaries."[6] The derogation of blackness, though varied from nation-state to nation-state, has been and remains global and transnational, making Afro-diasporic peoples' relation to the nation-state "contingent and partial."[7]

Partha Chatterjee claims that nationalist movements in Asia and Africa have been "posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West."[8] I would like to take up

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6. Paul Gilroy, "*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 155.

7. Gilroy, "*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack.*"

8. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 5.

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Gilroy's and Chatterjee's claims here, by noting that many forms of nationalism expressed by African-descended populations—be they the literal nationalisms of the African continent after World War II or the figurative nationalisms of black power movements in the United States or South Africa—contained within them a recognition of the nonterritorial character of their nationalist claims. The nonterritorial character of these nationalisms stemmed from the recognition that people of African descent in various parts of the world were stateless subjects. Thus, Ghanaian independence was not merely the instantiation of political sovereignty for Ghanaian nationalists—who desired an independent state—and would-be citizens, but a "political kingdom" for people of African descent the world over. Conversely, the Black Power movement in the United States was not solely preoccupied with the conditions of U.S. African Americans but people of African descent in Africa and the Caribbean. African and African-descended nationalisms have always had a transnational, interactive character.

The transnational linkages between African, Caribbean, and North American political actors bear great similarities with other transnational, nongovernmental and noncapitalist linkages of the first half of the twentieth century—anarchosyndicalism, communism, unionism, and other secular global movements. Afro-Modernity helps to underscore what Jorge Castañeda refers to as "longitudinal nationalism"—the development of horizontal, non–state-based relationships between political actors in various nation-states for the purpose of challenging or overturning policies in one or more nation-states.[9] In its various incarnations, from national liberation and civil rights movements to artistic trends, Afro-Modernity has pushed egalitarian discourses of Western modernity to their limits by critiquing the selective access that people of African descent have had to cultural, political, and economic sovereignty.

I will highlight three features of Afro-Modern politics and consciousness, articulated across various African diaspora and African communities: first, the distinctive role of history in Afro-Modernity; second, that inequalities visited on African and African-descended populations have often been understood temporally, as impositions on human time; and third, that this temporal understanding of racial and colonial orders in turn affected ideas about freedom, progress, and racial solidarity, evidenced in various communities in the distinct epochs of racial slavery, freedom, and emancipation, and in the post–World War II period of civil rights, black nationalist, and anticolonial movements.

9. Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

## Temporality: Bondage and Bonding

Intrinsic to Afro-Modern consciousness and politics is a concern for historical narrative. Historical narrative has served two broad aims: to project a history and to prove or acknowledge that the existence of people of African descent has been worthy of text. As Frank Kirkland brilliantly and cogently writes in his essay "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," black intellectuals in the post-emancipation period in the United States could not sidestep or underplay the momentous impact of slavery upon black subjects.[10] Kirkland writes: "Whereas modernity in the West fosters the belief that a future-oriented present, severed from any sense of an historical past, can yield culturally distinctive and progressive innovations, modernity in black promotes the conviction that a future oriented present can be the fortunate occasion in which culturally distinctive innovations are historically redemptive of a sense of past."[11] Through working within ruminations on the nexus of the black race and Western modernity of U.S. African Americans like Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, Kirkland's insights encapsulate the broader speculative problematic for Afro-Modernity writ large.

As the following analysis attests, many Afro-Modern peoples have rebutted the denial or diminished location of African-descended peoples in Western historical narratives. Here, a distinction between tabula rasa (erased slate) and tabula blanca, (blank slate) provides a critical juncture from which to assess differences between Afro-Modern versus Western discourses of modernity. For Greco-Roman city-states as well as the French Republic after the revolution of 1789, history began with the body politic, not before. Tabula rasa, therefore was an act of metaphorical violence, erasing historical narratives that acknowledged the roles of prior actors and agents in history.

For African and African-descended peoples, however, the equation of their past with an erased slate would deprive them of both past and history. As a people, they would be shorn of human time, not to mention humanity. Thus, David Hume's likening of a multilingual African to a parrot, Hegel's assertions that Africa was without history, and Kant's claims about the constitutional inferiority of African peoples can be viewed as the exclusion of African and African-derived people from the human family, and, consequently, any possibility of civ-

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10. Frank Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93), 136–65.

11. Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life," 159.

ilizational continuity, connection, or impression.[12] Their legacies, in short, were never upon the slate in the first place, for no descendent of their family was capable of such inscription. The blank slate remained to be written upon, and when it was, its narrative would be composed by Western powers, or at the every least, dictated by them.

How does one respond to the claim that one's people are without history? Like other marginalized peoples, this question provided at least two distinct possibilities for rebuttal and reply. If one accepted the notion that African history did indeed exist but was forgotten, obscured or erased, then one could, as Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, Ganga Zumba, and Bouckman have done, narrate a history of Africa and its peoples in accordance with the logic of tabula rasa: grand civilizations of centuries past, one continent and ocean away, in Africa.[13]

Black intellectuals throughout the New World shared the impulse to reach back across the epochal boundary between slavery and emancipation and the geographical boundary between Africa and points westward. In locales as diverse and disparate as Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana and Eric Williams's Trinidad, and in many black consciousness and black nationalist projects in white-dominated societies in the post–World War II period, a reconstruction of the past was one of the first pedagogical projects undertaken by Afro-Modern activists and intellectuals. These efforts are not solely (though they are significantly) an attempt to provide some sense of continuity with previous generations of people in distinct times and places, whether in Africa or upon a New World plantation but an attempt at giving some coherence to their present, continuous lives. In this more comparative sense, Kirkland's notion of a "future past" is replicable across African diaspora populations.[14] Whether it is Afro-Centrism or Quilombismo, Negritude or a

12. David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London, 1875), vol. 1, 252. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956); Kant's writings on the hierarchies of races, including *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960) and Kant's 1775 essay, "The Different Races," are analyzed by Charles W. Mills in *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 70.

13. See Martin Delany, *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (New York: T. Hamilton, 1861); Henry Highland Garnet, *The Past and Present Condition and Destiny of the Colored Race* (Miami, Fla.: Mnemosyne, 1969); Ganga Zumba was the first leader of the *quilombo*, or outlaw slave society, of Palmares, in Northeast Brazil. Bouckman was one of the early leaders of the Haitian Revolution.

14. See Kirkland, *Modernity and Intellectual Life*.

New Negro, each ideology and its attendant ideological subsets has a project of historical recovery that at the same time presupposes a new or, at minimum, distinctive, collective consciousness for African and African-derived peoples in the face of a perceived erasure of history by the West.

At the same time, however, a blank slate offered a critical distance and break from Africa if one accepted the premise that African–New World peoples were, in the main, New World or even European peoples. Both understandings of the past, however, whether implicitly or explicitly, would have to acknowledge the temporal disjuncture imposed on African-descended subjects. Even if black thinkers could affirm their historicity—that is, affirm that their pasts, however horrible, were worth knowing and writing about—they had to acknowledge the displacements and deferrals that racial slavery and imperialism imposed on them.

This is why Hume's cryptic commentary has dual significance, for it implies that the only civilizational possibilities for people of African descent were reactive and imitative. The act of mimicry itself, its subversive and infra-political implications notwithstanding, entails a temporal disjuncture. In historical and civilizational terms, Africans in the aggregate could—at best—aspire to caricature. They could only mimic the aggregate European.[15]

Herein lies the temporal disjuncture for African and African-derived peoples in their relationship with the modern West: As African and African-derived peoples had to sophisticate themselves through their relation to Western ideals and civilizations, they had to do so only after the West had. They could either "catch up" with the West by assuming certain practices and behaviors, or forever look across a civilizational chasm, stricken with a constitutional, genetic inability to forge societies that the West would stare upon with awe. The temporal consequences of racial inequality were to be experienced and felt across African and Afro-diasporic contexts wherever a person defined by their phenotypic proximity to the indigenous peoples of sub-Saharan Africa inhabited the same territorial realm with whites.

### Temporality: Racial Time

From this vantage point, it should not be difficult to consider the politics of human time affecting these populations. Consequently, what I call racial time became one of the disjunctive temporalities of both Western and Afro-Modernity, beginning

15. See Mills, *Racial Contract*.

with the emergence of racial slavery. Racial time is defined as the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups. Unequal relationships between dominant and subordinate groups produce unequal temporal access to institutions, goods, services, resources, power, and knowledge, which members of both groups recognize. When coupled with the distinct temporal modalities that relations of dominance and subordination produce, racial time has operated as a structural effect upon the politics of racial difference.[16] Its effects can be seen in the daily interactions—grand and quotidian —in multiracial societies. If we are to understand racial politics and inequality in non-phenotypic, non-essentialized terms, then we must attempt to comprehend the meanings of race against the canvas of space, time, and history.

Time, when linked to relations of dominance and subordination, is another social construct that marks inequality between various social groups.[17] In phenomenologically rooted considerations of time, Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckman characterized "waiting" as a "time structure that is imposed upon us."[18] Life-worlds, social being, and time as explicated by Henri Bergson, Schutz and Luckman, Martin Heidegger, and Emmanuel Levinas illuminate themes of otherness and temporality.[19]

16. My use of the term *structural effect* is derived from Timothy Mitchell's explication of the analytic distinctions between the state and civil society as a means of highlighting the difficulties in identifying the state as a concrete material entity. Mitchell suggests that a "boundary problem" exists in most accounts of the relationship between state and civil society, due to the absence of a neat distinction between state and civil society in real life. The effects of the state's activities can be seen and felt in civil society without the actual presence of the state itself. In this sense, the state has material effects without itself being material. See Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991): 77–96. By way of analogy, I would like to suggest that "race" or, more precisely, "racial difference" operates in a similar manner, as a structural effect on individual and group interaction. As a dynamic process, racial difference operates as an interpretive scheme in social, political, and cultural life. It serves to mediate the relationship between social structures and is neither a reified, static element of daily life nor a mere social construction that one can wish away merely by identifying its socially constructed nature.

17. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

18. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckman, *The Structures of the Life-World*, trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristam Engelhardt, Jr. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

19. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: S. Sonnenschein, 1910); Schutz and Luckman, *Structures of the Life-World*; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962); Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

From the beginning of their introduction to the New World, various populations of people of African descent were involved in struggles with slaveowners over their relative autonomy within the confines of slavery. For slaves, time management was an imposition of the slave master's construction of temporality divided along the axis of the master-slave relationship. This became increasingly apparent by the nineteenth century and is crucial for understanding what sorts of constraints slaves operated under within the "peculiar institution":

> The work extracted from slaves by their owner's occupied most of the slave's laboring time and thus inescapably circumscribed the lives of enslaved people. From the calories they expended to the music they played, no aspect of their lives was untouched by their work regimen— its physical and psychological demands, its organization, its seasonal rhythms, and its numerous divisions by skill, age and sex. Indeed, labor was so inseparable from life that, for most slaves, the two appeared to be one and the same.[20]

Students of both wage and slave labor in social history have analyzed time in relation to work levels—quality versus quantity of production.[21] With neither the structure of relationships that obtained between serfs and lords under feudalism nor that which held between labor and capital under capitalism, slaves could only struggle for the appropriation of time, such as the relative freedom to tend gardens on Saturdays or to shop independently at Sunday markets. Resistance to forced labor and time could be seen in work slowdowns, for example, by African–New World slaves. Tensions and social struggles arising from slave interactions with masters and whites in general, along with the resentments, anger, and fears associated with their interactions, became the sources for collective consciousness and, ultimately, strategies for organized and individuated resistance.

"Free time"—or, rather, slave time that was not accounted for in slave labor —could and did have political consequences. After the Haitian Revolution (1791– 1804), the control of slave time (both work and leisure) became a primary concern of slave owners throughout the New World. In the Caribbean, passes were issued to control movement of slaves in the Caribbean. One slave owner in the

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20. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, introduction to *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 2.

21. See Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976); also Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Vintage, 1976).

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U.S. South, for example, remarked: "I have ever maintained the doctrine that my negroes have no time whatever; that they are always liable to my call without questioning for a moment the propriety of it; and I adhere to this on the grounds of expediency and right."[22]

One glimpse of the desire for a new time for former slaves can be found in the observations of a Boston emissary who was sent to Orangeburg, South Carolina, to analyze political and economic conditions for cotton manufacturers in 1865, the year of slave emancipation in the United States:

> The sole ambition of the freedman . . . appears to be to become the owner of a little piece of land, there to erect a humble home, and to dwell in peace and security at his own free will, and pleasure. If he wishes, to cultivate the ground in cotton on his own account, to be able to do so without anyone to dictate to him hours or system of labor, if he wishes instead to plant corn or sorghum or sweet potatoes—to be able to do *that* free from any outside control, in one word to be *free*, to control his own time and efforts without anything that can remind him of his past sufferings in bondage. This is their idea, their desire and their hope.[23]

Former slaves, who recognized the direct correlation between their collective misery and white wealth, occupied the earthbound seat on the seesaw of modernity; their crouched weight enabled their masters to remain aloft. For them, emancipation, the rise of industrialization, sharecropping, tenant farming, and wage labor meant that one had to distinguish emancipation from sovereignty.

Temporal freedom meant not only an abolition of the temporal constraints slave labor placed on New World Africans but also the freedom to construct individual and collective temporality that existed autonomously from (albeit contemporaneously with) the temporality of their former masters. Thus, ensuing struggles between former slaves and their former masters produced what I shall call the second phase of racial time, beginning with the postemancipation period. Using E. P. Thompson's interpretation of the politics of labor time in English working-class formation, Philip S. Foner and David R. Roediger argue that the temporal politics of U. S. labor in the nineteenth century became one of the few common rallying points for workers of different skill and intraclass positions,

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22. Quoted in Michael J. Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 119.

23. Quoted in Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation," *The Journal of American History* (September 1994): 459.

distinct genders and races.[24] While they provide ample evidence of the verity of this assertion, less attention is paid to the manner in which various groups within working-class formations in the United States came to appreciate the temporal distinctiveness of their positions. Foner and Roediger persuasively argue that temporal politics encompassed ideas about freedom and citizenship, but a key distinction between the temporal politics involving labor and capital on the one hand and slaves and slave owners on the other is that while the former involved the politics of labor power under capitalism the latter was rooted in *total* labor. Theoretically, no time belonged solely to the slave. In order to radically transform the temporal inequities of their circumstances, slaves would have had to transform the mode of production and their position within it and would have had to transform themselves racially, an impossibility for the overwhelming majority of those considered black. Thus, racial time was a more "total" imposition of a dominant temporality than an abstract, acultural labor time.

There are three conceptual facets to racial time that can be used to analyze the unequal temporal dimensions of racial dynamics. Waiting, the first conceptualization, pertains to the first effect of the temporal disjunctures that result from racial difference. Members from subordinate groups objectively perceive the material consequences of social inequality, as they are literally made to wait for goods and services that are delivered first to members of the dominant group.

Time appropriation is the second conceptual innovation. It refers to the actual instance of social movement when group members who constitute a collective social formation decide to intervene in public debate for the purpose of affecting positive change in their overall position and location in society. For Afro-diasporic peoples, this has meant efforts to eradicate the chasm of racial time, not only in the nation-states where they reside but also in the nation-states where members of their epistemological community reside. While time seizure or appropriation operates on both collective and individual levels, it is collective action, I would argue, that often emboldens individuals to appropriate the time of a dominant racial subject and its related institutions for themselves. Time appropriation in racial politics mostly occurs during periods of social upheaval and transformation, whether locally, nationally, or transnationally. Sometimes starting in relative isolation, as in the Montgomery bus boycott, time appropriations can launch a series of events, propelling a single act into a series of acts, within the same location or well beyond its geographical realm.

24. See Philip S. Foner and David R. Roediger, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day* (New York: Verso, 1989).

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The third conceptualization is concerned with the ethico-political relationship between temporality and notions of human progress. The belief that the future should or must be an improvement on the present is the underlying presumption of this idea, but it is also a notion with religious undertones. Millenarian movements, for example, contain ideas of "the last time" or a new time, either of which is the consequence of the encounter and arrival of God. Eschatological renderings of racial time can be found throughout the African diaspora, from the Voudoun of Boukman in the Haitian insurrection, to John Brown's and Nat Turner's invocations of a vengeful God who wreaks havoc on sinful whites, to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*: the supernatural is summoned to leaven white privilege on earth, obliterating a temporality where evil in the form of racial prejudice, violence, and annihilation predominates. Religion provides the language for impending confrontation, but the spaces for confrontation were and are plantation societies, tenements, cities, rural areas, and nations—in short, any site where racial prejudice, socioeconomic exploitation, and violence are combined.

### From Temporal Bondage to Temporal Freedom: Postemancipation and the New Negro

The term *New Negro* is invariably associated with the Harlem Renaissance and notions of cultural uplift proffered by Alain Locke and other black artists and intellectuals of 1920s Harlem.[25] The term *New Negro*, however, predates the Harlem Renaissance and was used by many African-American communities outside of the United States. The very genealogy of the term is an instructive guide to how African-descended populations infused previously negative terms with newly transformed meanings. According to Michael J. Mullin, the term was first used by slaveowners in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to characterize enslaved Africans who required "seasoning"—acculturation in the linguistic, social, and laboring practices of their New World existence.[26] In parts of the Caribbean, New Negroes were assigned already "seasoned" slaves from their region or ethnicity to enable these new slaves to make the transition more rapidly and smoothly.

Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian populations used *New Negro* to characterize their own postemancipation eras. In 1904, eighteen years after the abolition of slavery in Cuba, an Afro-Cuban civil rights activist created *El Nuevo Criollo* (New

25. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (1988): 129–155.
26. See Mullin, *Africa in America*.

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Creole in English), a newspaper devoted to the dismantling of myths of racial equality and ideologies of racial discrimination in Cuba. It is important to note that in the Cuban context, *creole* was meant to apply to first-generation whites born in the New World. Thus *El Nuevo Criollo* had a double meaning and was a variation on the theme of the New Negro: first as the new Cuban, second as the *gente de color* (black and mulatto) who sought to make the term *criollo* or *creole* encompass blacks and mulattos.[27]

A similar process of racial consciousness and recognition was occurring in Brazil, where an Afro-Brazilian vanguard emerged in the 1920s in São Paulo. They too would use the term *gente de color* to characterize blacks and mulattos as members of the same race (class was used interchangeably here). Like other Afro-diasporic communities in the New World, this vanguard viewed racial uplift as their principal responsibility. Little more than one generation removed from slavery, activists like Jose Correia Leite saw these and other tasks related to racial uplift as symptomatic of their epoch and phase of national/historical development: "The hearts of all sensible blacks have felt the sweetness of a new gentleness, as part of our compassionate temperament, when the rise of a new route [*rota despontar*] appears, guiding the successful fertile seeds that we have implanted within the breast of the race for the formation of our united front; for the rising of our column of resistance, securing the smiling, rising generation that comes in the future."[28] The rich, gendered symbolism of this passage conveys the hope of racial uplift and progress for Afro-Brazilians, with a clearly delineated understanding of the role of a black elite in making collective advances that would secure an improved future for the next generation of Afro-Brazilians.

Literate, possessed of some formal education, skilled or semiskilled in their professional occupations, the black elite were primed to exploit the meager resources and opportunities available to them for individual and collective advancement. The Afro-diasporic intelligentsia of the postemancipation period shared the presumption that they represented the vanguard—not necessarily the avant-garde—of their respective populations. In many ways, the U. S. African-American W. E. B. DuBois's concept of the "Talented Tenth," had its corollary in several African-American populations.[29] Furthermore, they shared an abiding belief in the abil-

27. See Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

28. Jose Correia Leite, "O Clarim d'Alvorada," in *...E Disse O Velho Militante Jose Correia Leite*, ed. Cuti (São Paulo: Secretaria Municipal de Cultura, 1992), 223–224 (my translation).

29. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

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ity of black intelligentsia and ultimately, the "less talented" members of these communities to participate in and benefit from capitalist industrial development, mass communications, and modern technology.

These New Negroes, from Colombia to Cuba to the United States and Canada, were also conflicted about their relationship to their own cultural practices. While there is much literature celebrating the role of spirituals and "folk" practices and remedies in slave communities, the New Negro's evidenced discomfort with forms of behavior that could have been—and often were—negatively associated with slavery by white and black alike would become the basis for a key dilemma of black aesthetics and cultural production throughout the diaspora.

Befitting their generation, the most significant leadership among African-American elite of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were journalists, writers, or otherwise involved in mass communications and mass transport. DuBois and Jose do Patroncino of Brazil were both journalists. Marcus Garvey was a printer by trade and training, a vocation that would be put to use in various newspaper and publishing ventures. In this sense, the invention of movable type had enormous consequences for former slaves who were among the last participants in the making of the modern world to be allowed to read and write in a dominant language.

Alain Locke and Garvey, like Martin Delany and Alexander Crummell before them, understood "the Negro condition" as a transnational phenomenon. Racism within the confines of the nation-state was a constitutive, rather than a secondary feature of national identity, Benedict Anderson's claims notwithstanding.[30] Alain Locke, who understood this, wrote that "as with the Jew, persecution is making the negro international."[31] These sentiments were echoed in other parts of the New World. In *Prevision*, another Afro-Cuban newspaper, founded in the first decade of the century, an Afro-Cuban activist for political independence wrote in 1928 "Let us make a circle, reconcentrate in it, and gather our race in its center. Let us make a stoic, strong, absorbing race; let us imitate the Jewish people, they are self-sufficient. . . . *Black comes before everything.*"[32]

Social and political movements toward national emancipation, in the cases of Haiti and Cuba, or toward racial equality, in the cases of Jamaica and the United States, were infused with the recognition of racial time and a desire for a new

30. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

31. Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

32. Juan Leon y Pimentel, "Adelante Prevision," *Prevision*, 15 September 1908, quoted in Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 151.

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epoch for people of African descent. A new time for former slaves throughout the New World was emergent but contingent and highly precarious. In the United States, negative Southern reaction to black advances of Reconstruction (1865–77) led to disenfranchisement and renewed racial terror.[33] In other parts of the New World, Western ideals of nation-statehood, civil society, and individual citizenship culminated in national independence for most colonies of the hemisphere by 1820. This process was complicated by other legacies of scientific racism which would serve to resubordinate freemen and women after emancipation in newly minted Latin American polities.

It was a new time nonetheless, one that required an orientation toward the future and a rupture with the past. In this sense, the predicament of former slaves can be seen as the empirical referent for Jürgen Habermas's observation that claimants of modernity refuse to take "their orientation from the models supplied by another epoch."[34] In fact, the preoccupation of much of the vanguard of postemancipation periods in Brazil, Haiti, the United States, Cuba, and many other New World nations with African-American populations was to rid themselves and their communities of any vestiges of enslavement, not only in collective memory but also in behavior and daily habits.

By the twentieth century in the United States, the term *New Negro* came to be associated with postemancipation Negroes who were bearers of new knowledge, values, and behaviors. Locke suggested that the New Negro's mission should be understood in two senses: as "the advance guard of the African peoples in their contact with twentieth-century civilization" and as "a mission of rehabilitating the race in world esteem from the loss of prestige for which the fate and conditions of slavery have been so largely responsible."[35]

### Afro-Modernity, Mother Africa: Racial Time in Ghana

The New Negro's calls for transnational solidarity were heard and acted upon in Africa, further complicating the temporalities of Afro-Modernity. The emergence in 1957 of the first African country to achieve independence in the postwar period, the independent nation-state of Ghana, and its first president, Kwame Nkrumah—

33. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

34. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 7.

35. Locke, *The New Negro*, 14.

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two motivating forces behind Pan-Africanism—typified the transnational, anti-colonial solidarity of the period.

The forces that would bring about independence, however, began much earlier, via the intersection of anticolonial struggle, Afro-diasporic politics, and the political evolution of Nkrumah. Like many aspiring African leaders, Nkrumah traveled abroad for his education, leaving Ghana to study at the all-black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1935. This was in keeping with the crucial role historically black colleges such as Lincoln and Howard Universities played in educating a U.S. African-American elite along with emergent political and cultural figures from the Caribbean and Africa.

Subsequently, Nkrumah traveled to London, where he was tutored by George Padmore, founder of the African News Bureau and mentor, with his childhood friend, C. L. R. James, to numerous African and Asian intellectuals who would become prominent in the emergence of Third World politics by the 1950s. Nkrumah returned to Ghana in the 1940s to become active in nationalist politics. In 1948, he was imprisoned, along with other nationalist leaders, for his activities in the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), which called for greater political autonomy from Britain. In that same year he founded the *Daily Mail*, a nationalist newspaper. He would later renounce his affiliation with the UGCC because of its lack of a popular base. Along with Komla Agbeli Gbedemah, Nkrumah helped form the Convention People's Party, an ambiguous mix of lower-middle-class, peasant, and working-class people, in 1951. Once again jailed in 1951 by colonial authorities for political agitation, Nkrumah became the party's leader from his jail cell, winning a parliamentary post in Accra, the nation's capital.

After achieving self-government in 1952, the republic of Ghana under Nkrumah's leadership became a matrix for Pan-Africanism. Nkrumah attempted to build a transnational Pan-African unity and relied upon the political advice of people like Padmore, DuBois and James.[36] DuBois, Padmore, Alphaeus Hunton, Ras Makkonnen, and other Afro-diasporic scholars passed through Ghana during this phase, providing strategic, technical and other forms of support to the regime. Nkrumah, similarly, provided counsel to numerous African, Caribbean, and U.S. African-American leaders.

In *Black Power*, Richard Wright's reflections on Ghana and Nkrumah in the heady days of independence, the U.S. African-American expatriate found him-

36. See C. L. R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983); Manning Marable, *African and Caribbean Politics: From Kwame Nkrumah to Maurice Bishop* (London: Verso, 1987).

self serving as a symbol of temporal disjuncture in an exchange with a British bank clerk in Accra.[37] After inquiring about Wright's opinion of Ghana on the eve of its independence, the clerk offered this almost fraternal, conspiratorial assertion: "You American chaps are three hundred years ahead of these Africans. It'll take a long time for them to catch up with you. I think that they are trying to go too fast, don't *you*? You see, you American chaps are used to living in a white man's country, and these fellows are not."[38] The banker's observations locate Wright's black identity under the rubric of American while placing him at a level of civilizational development superior to that of the African. The fact that the disparity is articulated in temporal terms shows one way in which the equation time = progress shaped the banker's thinking about the differences between Africans and U.S. African-Americans. Instructive in their absence are the institutions and artifacts of modernity and modernization which Africans were presumably without. Thus, without engagement and familiarity with "the white man's country" Africans lived in a sort of empty time, one without a parallel Western history, which would require three hundred years to redress. But the years themselves would not redress their alleged underdevelopment; rather, it was the march toward technological, institutional, and normative sophistication, a sophistication which Wright himself concurred was needed in order to raise levels of national and continental accomplishment in Africa to those of Europe or North America.

Nkrumah, like other African vanguardist leaders of the era, struggled with the glaring inequalities in Ghanaian and African life that fell disproportionately upon the shoulders of indigenous African peoples. Even under the constraints of limited political autonomy, Nkrumah saw through the veneer of a common fate and destiny for colonizer and colonized, to the direct linkages between European enrichment, African impoverishment, and the exploitation of African-derived peoples in other parts of the world. In characterizing the various forms of educational inequalities suffered by Ghanaian and other African peoples in 1951, Nkrumah provided the following overview of the confrontation between Convention Peoples Party (CPP) nationalists and colonial administrators in that year:

> When we confronted the colonial administration with this appalling situation on taking office at the beginning of 1951, they told us that the budget was limited and time was needed. Time, they said, was required to train

37. Richard Wright, *Black Power, a Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper, 1954).

38. Wright, *Black Power*, 138.

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the army of teachers needed for the education of all the children. They did
not look very happy when we pointed out that they seemed to have time
enough to allow the traders and shippers and mining companies to amass
huge fortunes. As for the budget, we made the point that it did not seem
improbable to use part of those fortunes to educate the children of the
land from which they had been drawn.[39]

Nkrumah understood the temporal dimensions of inequality in his national experi-
ence. Time was the process through which British racism and imperialism moved
in Ghana. These forces structured time to move more quickly for the extraction of
capital, resources, and surplus value by the colonizers but less so for the educa-
tional development of Ghanaian children and the training of their teachers, or for
the use of some of those extracted resources for positive national development.

Annihilating this temporal discrepancy would mean the annihilation of colo-
nial underdevelopment itself, leading perhaps, to what Homi Bhabha has referred
to as post-colonial time.[40] This discrepancy was recognized by African national-
ists throughout the continent as the path toward unequal development, self-hatred,
and dim esteem. What was required was an altering of the extant historical path
toward a new time.

### Racial Time in the United States

In the United States, the inequalities and injustices of blacks had their own tempo-
rality. To be black in the United States meant that one had to wait for nearly every-
thing. Legalized segregation, the maintenance of separate and largely unequal
institutions, meant that blacks, as a consequence of prejudicial treatment, received
health care, education, police protection, transportation, and a host of other ser-
vices only *after* those same services were provided for whites. Above all, legalized
apartheid in the United States represented an imposed disjunctive time structure
within which U. S. African-Americans were made to live.

On segregated public buses (such as the one ridden by Rosa Parks in Mont-
gomery, Alabama in 1955) standing black passengers were forced to wait for
available seats in the black section, even if seats in the white section were avail-
able. In the era of legally segregated schools, it was common practice for black
schools to receive teaching implements only after they had been used by white
students in white schools. The following excerpt from an interview with Margaret

39. Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 47.
40. Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

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Wright, a black Mississippian who attended segregated schools from the late 1950s to the late 1960s in the town of Hattiesburg, graphically illustrates the temporality of racial inequality under segregation:

> There was a cultural lag as far as receiving textbooks that white students used, about five years. It was a policy of the state that you could not order new books for 10 years. This put us (blacks) about 15 years behind the times in terms of textbook information. Teachers had a harder job because of this. They had to introduce more contemporary discussions because of this. By the time we got the books the information was outmoded and irrelevant. Three or four students' names would be in the book before we got them. By the time we received the books they were in either fair or poor condition, with the names crossed out and the previous condition of the book, "Good" or "Excellent," crossed out as well. Sometimes we would know the white children who owned the books previously, or we knew of them. We might have known someone who worked for them.[41]

Wright's reflections on her early years in segregated secondary schools encapsulates racial time for U.S. African-Americans during this epoch of "separate but equal." In this sense, what she characterizes as a "cultural lag" encompasses the temporal disjunctures of racial inequality. State government both structures and maintains the unequal and temporally distinct distribution of resources which, in turn, are given symbolic and human form through the mediated interaction between students and teachers of both races via used textbooks.

This procession of unequal transmission of data between whites and blacks represents what can be characterized as an institutionalized temporal disjuncture. Black students were low on the foodchain of disseminated information, and they received certain information only after it had been consumed and discarded by white students. It also suggested to black students that they did not deserve the education and information of their era—that the most up-to-date materials and training were not meant for them. Ideals of and aspirations toward racial equality could be juxtaposed by civil rights activists against the realities of anachronistic or obsolete goods, services and even norms that were accepted by black communities because those communities had little or no choice.

Thus for blacks, waiting has encompassed the sense of human vitality that is harnessed because of racial time, the imposition of a time-structure that varies according to race. In *Why We Can't Wait*, Martin Luther King captures the frustration waiting produced among blacks and forcefully argues for the withdrawal

41. Margaret Wright, interview by author, Cambridge, Mass., 6 July 1995.

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of imposed time. Calling the movement of nonviolence the Revolution, King noted: "It is important to understand, first of all, that the Revolution is not indicative of a sudden loss of patience within the Negro. The Negro had never really been patient in the pure sense of the word. The posture of silent waiting was forced upon him psychologically because he was shackled physically."[42] In response, King argued that the movement sought to counteract the "go it slow approach" of many white liberals, who believed the Negro to be moving too fast: "We can, of course, try to *temporize*, negotiate small, inadequate changes and prolong the timetable of freedom in the hope that the narcotics of delay will dull the pain of progress. We can try, but we shall certainly fail. The shape of the world will not permit the luxury of gradualism and procrastination. Not only is it immoral. It will not work."[43] Here, we glimpse Paul Virilio's synthesis of speed and politics, as the struggle for black civil rights can be conceived of as a movement to reduce waiting, to explode the differentials of human time.[44] Incrementalism was slow, therefore conservative. Acceleration of racial equality was temporally and politically emancipating and thereby good for the "race." In ameliorating the conditions that structured inequalities, time can be redirected toward the maximization of life-worlds. Schutz's phenomenology of time is again useful, as he distinguishes world-time—the time which transcends the life of an individual—from the life-world of individuals.

It could be said that the recognition by U.S. African-Americans of the disparity of racialized time conveys the tension among the life-world of black people, whites, and world-time (the time which exists *after* individual lives have expired). Interestingly, even in his proposal for a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged, King posited that like veterans of the armed forces, blacks should be compensated for time lost.[45]

In this sense, racial and civil equality also meant the annihilation of racialized time. Thus, racialized time can be viewed as a negation of productive life. Blacks would no longer have to worry about hiding their ambitions, appearing as if they sought to move too fast in the world of whites. After all, waiting also denotes taking one's cues from somewhere or someone other than oneself; the end of waiting meant the beginning of a more autonomous existence.

With this obliteration of racialized time, the perception of temporality shifted

42. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 25.
43. King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, 141.
44. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semio(Text), 1977).
45. King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, 150.

from an axis of inequality to a potential era of racial equality. Again, emphasizing the political and social dimensions of time construction, memories of the period before inequality remind subaltern activists of the conditions they endured and the period in their lives that they do not want to return to.

Like Nkrumah, King understood the temporal dimensions of inequality. Though much maligned for its analytic—as opposed to its analogical—limitations, the parallels between colonialism in the Third World and racial oppression in the United States converge on the roles of violence and temporality. Violence, meted out by the state and by those whom the state vests with qualitatively superior citizenship, structures the process of temporal inequality. In both the colonial and postcolonial contexts, racial difference was the premise for maintaining inequality between U.S. whites and blacks, as well as between Africans and Europeans. Through a reversal of the predominant "race-centered" approaches, one can discern the "race" of subordinate subjects through their daily activities and institutionalized denials and not, as is commonly the interpretive scheme, through phenotype. The experiential knowledge of human time that is peculiar to certain groups in given situations is the actual basis of collective consciousness—whether of race, nationality, gender, or other forms of conscious collective activity.

Intellectuals of civil rights and black nationalist tendencies in the 1960s articulated this sense of *time appropriation*, seizing another's time and making it one's own. Bobby Seale's exhortation to "seize the time" affirms the need to appropriate a new temporality, wherein new values, freedoms, and forms of expression are operative.[46] Yet because struggles toward moments of equality are essentially power relations, the new era of equality is not something one can merely assume exists, and, as a result, "naturally" flow into. Seale does not want to halt the march of history, but to grasp it, seize it, and transform it for one's own use, an act which previously had been denied within the old time.

Time as ethical progress is contained in King's characterization of the delay, procrastination, and temporizing of racial equality in the United States as immoral and his equation of incrementalism with inconsequential change and conservatism.[47] Within the context of the United States, new time consisted of egalitarian relations between blacks and whites. The more powerful the imposition of one group's conception of time upon another, the more a subordinate group will be forced to measure its hopes and aspirations against what is generally consid-

46. Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970).
47. King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*.

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ered to be humanly possible within the context of their social and political circumstances. For critics of imposed time, there is the recognition of temporal distinctions between dominant and subordinate groups. For activists of subaltern groups, the question "What should we be doing with our time?" emerges from this recognition. In turn, activists spend part or all of their lives responding to this question in both word and deed.

## Conclusion

The commentary, speeches, and social practices analyzed here provide glimpses of the temporal politics of racial inequality within the African diaspora and upon the African continent itself. The transnational forms of political organization and community activism among Afro-diasporic peoples is a form of imagined community, in the sense in which Anderson conceptualizes this term but with two important qualifications.[48]

First, the glimpses of Afro-Modern politics provided here suggest that African and African-descended populations considered themselves part of a transnational "imagined community" but not premised on the territorial rudiments Anderson attributes to creole nationalism. Rather, their understanding of community had a distinct episteme, rooted as it was in a more epistemological, temporal sense of community.

Second, contrary to Anderson's claims that racism is merely the vehicle through which national chauvinism is expressed and implemented, the political histories of the African diaspora expose the role that racism has played as a constitutive —not an epiphenomenal—feature of national identity. This counterargument is in keeping with the work of Anthony Smith, Tom Nairn, and Ernest Gellner, whose research into the relationships between race, state, and nation have underscored how race and/or ethnicity have functioned as a foundational—though mythical—element of national identity.[49]

Like the movement of capital within the international political economy, Afro-Modern politics has treated national-state boundaries and territorial sovereignty as secondary considerations of their imagined community. Afro-Modernity is at once a part of and apart from the parameters of Western modernities. It has had its own rhythm, flux and reflux, advances and setbacks—in the words of Lang-

48. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
49. Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Tom Nairn, *The Breakup of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983).

ston Hughes, its dreams deferred. In conclusion, I have tried to suggest that the encounters between people of African descent and the West encompass questions of space, temporality, and modernity in addition to questions of slavery and culture. These encounters remind us, I believe, that there are many vantage points from which one can view and experience this thing known as modernity: as nightmare or utopia; as horrible past or future present. These contrasting views caution us against modernity's reification and implore us to view modernity as a process of lived experience, with winners and losers, as well as strivings for redemption, recovery, retribution, and revolution, each experience tumbling into another and becoming—dare I say—history.

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