



## The Prophecy of Self-Emancipation: Walter Rodney and the Scholarship and Praxis of Defiance in the African World

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Walter Rodney joined the ancestors just over three decades ago. Yet his defiant scholarship—and defiant praxis—remain instructive, with vital lessons for contemporary toilers and strugglers in the African world, meaning the continent and the diaspora. His scholarly endeavours, invariably characterised by defiance, were no intellectual abstraction. Rather, they were linked to the pursuit of the liberation of Africans, at home and abroad, along with sufferers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. He was at once an African world revolutionary and a world revolutionary.

He died, aged 38, in his native land of Guyana in 1980 on Friday, 13 June. The then president of Guyana, Forbes Burnham, promptly gave out that Rodney was a victim of misfortune. Rodney, Burnham said, had had bad luck. Burnham was as cynical and calculating as he was superstitious and cold-blooded. He failed to add that he had conveniently arranged Rodney's supposed bad luck, by ordering his assassination, presumably to be carried out on that day. Rodney's offence was in opposing Burnham's strongman rule—in other words, his dictatorship.<sup>1</sup>

Eusi Kwayana was prominent among those who fought in the trenches alongside Rodney in the struggle against Burnham's rule.

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In 1986, six years after Rodney's assassination, Kwayana published a biography of his fallen comrade. As biographies go, Kwayana's sketch of Rodney's life, at a breezy fifty-three pages, is rather abbreviated. Nor was Kwayana's work brought out by a marquee publisher in Europe or North America. It was published, instead, by the *Catholic Standard*, a weekly newspaper in Georgetown, Guyana. For these reasons, Kwayana's biography remains little known, having, alas, found no place of honour in the scholarship on Walter Rodney (Lewis 1998). Yet Kwayana's text brims with first-hand insights into Rodney's last, and most consequential, political campaign—the one to rid Guyana of the Burnham dictatorship (Westmaas 2004).

The leading theme in Kwayana's biographical sketch is self-emancipation. And Rodney, Kwayana offers, was preeminently a 'prophet of self-emancipation'. As an intellectual activist, Rodney's chief mission was 'preaching the gospel of the class of earners' (Kwayana 1986), a gospel that insists on the capacity of the

working people, at all times and in all places, to bring about their own liberation—in fine, to fulfill the prophecy of self-emancipation.

Viewed in its totality, Rodney's literary output amounts to an organising manual centred on the prophecy of self-emancipation. We should take Kwayana at his word, meaning we should grapple seriously with the language he uses to describe Rodney. It bears emphasising that Kwayana did not call Rodney a 'theorist' of self-emancipation, terminology that is de rigueur in the secular academy. Rather, he describes Rodney as a prophet, using sacerdotal language, sacred terminology, religious diction. On Kwayana's telling, Rodney was a prophet preaching a gospel; he was not a preacher pontificating about self-emancipation. There is a difference, and a crucial one, between the prophet and the preacher. The preacher's task is largely one of reconciliation—reconciling congregants to current reality, to the powers that be. Soothing, encouraging, bearing good news—such is the mission of the preacher. The prophet, on the contrary, is the bearer of bad news—but with this important caveat: the news may be bad, but it needn't remain that way. A better world is possible.

The prophet's is a call to repentance, reparation, reconstruction—in other words, revolution. Small

wonder that the powerful generally have had such great aversion to prophecy and prophets. Preaching may be reconcilable with power; prophecy rarely is. The job of the prophet is a dangerous line of work, hazardous to his or her health. Hence Forbes Burnham's declaration about Walter Rodney and bad luck—a fate the powerful seem to have an uncanny ability to confer on those who challenge their hold on power.

Burnham could have had the good luck of hosting the event at which Rodney made his world debut as a prophet of self-emancipation. That event was the Congress of Black Writers. The key organisers of the Congress, most of whom hailed from the Caribbean but were based in Montreal, Canada, discussed with Burnham holding the Congress in Guyana. In publicly expressing interest in hosting the Congress of Black Writers, he was pretending, as always, taking his interlocutors for the proverbial ride. Ever the dissimulator, and never wanting to appear to be out of ideological fashion, Burnham was not really serious. The Congress, planned amid the global ascendancy of Black Power, was a quintessential Black Power event. Burnham, however, opposed Black Power, even as he feigned interest in it, just as he would later and with equal mendacity affect conversion to socialism and Marxism-Leninism. In fact, the only 'ism' the Guyanese strongman ever supported was Burnhamism—personal rule. Accordingly, the Congress of Black Writers convened not in Georgetown, but in Montreal, in 1968—a year of rebellion and revolutionary fervour all over the world (Austin 2018).

Even as the Congress was in session, Burnham's ambassador to

Canada was offering a rejoinder to it. There was no need for a Black Power movement in his country, the ambassador offered, as Black Power was already in effect in Burnham's Guyana. The Zairian strongman, Mobutu Sese Seko—to whom Burnham bears comparison, from self-fashioning to ideological appropriation—would later, and more infamously, make a similar proclamation. Black Power is sought all over the world, Mobutu made his billboards broadcast on the occasion of the epic pugilistic contest in Kinshasa in 1974 between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, but it is realised in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). Characteristically, the Zairian strongman lied. Mobutu, like Burnham, was slandering Black Power. But unlike Burnham, Mobutu—who was deeply implicated in the murder of Patrice Lumumba—mercifully refrained from appropriating the Marxist moniker. As the first high-profile victim of neocolonialism in postcolonial Africa, the martyred Lumumba necessarily became part of the iconography of the Congress of Black Writers, alongside other male icons, most notably Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and Kwame Nkrumah.

Walter Rodney was invited to the Congress by its lead organiser, Rosie Douglas, who later became prime minister of Dominica. He was in his element at the Congress, arguably the single-most consequential Black Power gathering ever. It was there that Rodney, then all of twenty-six years old, a freshly minted PhD from SOAS and a little-known lecturer in African History at the Jamaica campus of the University of the West Indies, strode onto the stage of history.

Horace Campbell attended the Congress of Black Writers and wrote an assessment of it, which was published in the student newspaper at York University in Toronto, where he was then an undergraduate (Campbell 1968). Unless he is a meticulous archivist, Campbell likely does not have a copy of that article. The York University library certainly does not, since it began microfilming the student newspaper only in 1969, the year after Campbell wrote his postmortem. But not to worry. There is an ace in the hole—or, as Kwayana, a biblical scholar of sorts, may have phrased it, a ram in thicket. The rescuers are those outstanding, if unwitting, archivists of the global black liberation struggles and, more generally, antinomian movements everywhere. These would be the imperialist and capitalist intelligence services, in this case the special branch of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, popularly known as the Mounties.

Naturally, the Mounties took a keen interest in the Congress of Black Writers. Their eyes and ears, including some black ones, were present at the Congress. The Mounties were also avid collectors of material generated by and about the Congress, including Campbell's postmortem in that student newspaper. Of the Congress, the young Campbell wrote: 'No one who went will really be the same again.' (Campbell 1968). From all indications, Horace Campbell was among the transformed. So, too, was Walter Rodney, who—despite all that Horace Campbell would later write about him (Campbell 1987)—did not figure in Campbell's postmortem of the Congress of Black Writers. Rodney did figure in the calculations of the neocolonial authorities in Jamaica,

who banned him from returning to the island after his attendance at the Congress of Black Writers, the case for doing so having been provided by the local intelligence apparatus inherited from the British colonialists (West 2006).

Prophecy is a function of sociology, not biology—which is to say, prophets are made, not born. As a prophet of self-emancipation, Rodney first displayed his calling in Jamaica. There, his chief interlocutors were Rastafarians and radical intellectuals, many of whom were also Rastas, albeit mainly of the autodidactic sort. Notably, too, Rodney's Jamaican interlocutors were largely male, as seen in the title of his collection of Jamaica-based, Black Power-aligned speeches and essays, *The Groundings with my Brothers* (Rodney 1969).

Rodney's expulsion from Jamaica, which in turn led to a social and political explosion on the island, raised his stock up and down the radical Caribbean (Meeks 1996; Quinn 2014). The Trinidad Revolution of 1970, that epochal Caribbean event in the era of Black Power, may well have happened without Rodney's expulsion from Jamaica. But it likely would not have happened the way it actually did without the regional after-effects of Rodney's expulsion from Jamaica. For those involved in it, the organising manuals of the Trinidad Revolution were manifold. Notably, however, they included *Groundings with my Brothers*, which was read alongside textbooks on guerrilla warfare by such figures as Ernest 'Che' Guevara, Mao Zedong and Kwame Nkrumah (Ryan and Stewart 1995).

Another fortunate outcome of Rodney's expulsion from Jamaica was his best-known book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, which, like his overall message of self-emancipation, remains relevant today (Rodney 1972). This book certainly would not, could not, have been written the way it was, if it could have been written at all, without his presence on the African continent and more particularly at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. (Harisch 2020). Certain deans of African Studies had given a cool reception to Rodney's first book, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, his revised doctoral thesis (Rodney 1970). Their response was far chillier to *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, which they practically put on intellectual ice, generally refusing to review in their journals. They peremptorily dismissed it as a work of polemic unworthy of serious scholarly attention (Johnson 2021). It was not the first, or last, time that a defiant text on Africa was declared by deans and dons to be polemical, tendentious, undeserving of their erudite attention—as if erudition was theirs to grant or withhold at will. Inherent in the prophecy of self-emancipation is the imperative to break the stranglehold of the intellectual gatekeepers and to pry loose the tyrannical grip of those who uphold academic orthodoxy. That is the purpose of defiant scholarship on global Africa, as practised by Rodney.

Defiance rang out, too, in Rodney's last outstanding work of scholarship, *A History of the Guyanese Working People*, an essential handmaiden to his political project upon returning to Guyana after his Tanzanian sojourn (Rodney

1981). Predictably, Rodney taught and practised the essence of his prophetic message. Rodney's students, Kwayana, said: 'Left his courses interested in discovering the story of the oppressed classes ... and learning of their efforts and limited successes in the destiny of self-emancipation, for which, Rodney taught, there was no substitute (Kwayana 1968). If the struggles of African peoples in the modern world—a world they were so instrumental in making—proves anything, it is just that: There is no substitute for self-emancipation. This is the prophetic message, the revolutionary doctrine, of Walter Rodney for toilers and strugglers in the twenty-first century.'

## Note

1. Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Enquire and Report on the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of the Late Dr. Walter Rodney on Thirteenth Day of June, One Thousand Nine Hundred and Eighty at Georgetown [Guyana], 8 February 2016. Available online at [https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/doi%3Arodney\\_report](https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/doi%3Arodney_report).

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**Walter Rodney (1942–1980)**