

And What About the Human?: Freedom, Human Emancipation, and the Radical Imagination

In my private mind, however, I was increasingly aware of large areas of human existence that my history and politics did not seem to cover. What did men live by? What did they want? What did history show that they wanted?

—C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*

Introduction

Before I begin to explore the various elements of these reflections, it would be appropriate to say a few words about the overarching project in which this intervention is situated. For a few years now, I have been working on what could be called the “Freedom Project.” I began first by thinking about the issues surrounding slave emancipation in Jamaica and the Caribbean, and quickly became preoccupied with that most important

This is an edited version of a talk delivered as the Marta Sutton Weeks Distinguished Visitor at the Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford University, in February 2012. I wish to thank both the staff and director of the center for their generosity. Thanks to Professor James Campbell and all the participants who probed the issues I raised. I also want to thank the anonymous readers of the *boundary 2* editorial collective for their comments.

of revolutions, the dual Haitian Revolution.¹ Working through the conceptions of freedom that emerged from this revolution, it became clear that the notions and practices of freedom practiced by the Haitian ex-slaves had some genealogical relationship to concepts and practices of freedom that were present in the American Southern Freedom Movement (sometimes called the civil rights movement) in the mid-twentieth century. When the project took hold of me, I was teaching a course in intellectual history on Black intellectuals from the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa, and at the time in my thinking, I understood the project as one that fell within the disciplinary fields of intellectual history and political theory. However, while teaching the course, it became clear that working in comparative terms across Africa and the African Diaspora, interesting things were beginning to occur that transformed how I worked as a critical intellectual. The implications of this comparative study resulted in three things. First, I had to grapple with the conundrum that while freedom had been constructed in Western political philosophy and the history of thought primarily as a value and normative ideal, my research was leading me to begin to grapple with freedom as a *practice*.² Second, if freedom was a practice, an activity, then how does one begin to examine it in all its complexities? This particular concern led me to matters of historiography and archives, while confronting me with a double difficulty. The matter was not just about a search for new archives, but since one was examining freedom within the frame of what Walter Benjamin called "the traditions of the oppressed," then one issue was about the character of the *archival gaze*, and secondarily but just as important: "How and what *constituted an archive*?" As the research proceeded, a third issue emerged that had to do with the disciplines. Could political theory, or even a radical form of intellectual history, allow for the exploration of freedom within the frame of new archives and from the perspective of the "traditions of the oppressed"? Of course, one was also operating in the interdisciplinary field of Africana studies and so worked outside

1. Even though I am calling the Haitian Revolution a "dual revolution," I do so tentatively, as, increasingly, I have come to think about the revolution in more complicated terms. For a discussion of this, see my forthcoming book, *The Politics of an Impossible Revolution: Haiti, History, and Revolution*. This book is part of a trilogy on freedom, which I am currently working on.

2. There are figures in the Western tradition who pay attention to freedom as a practice and activity, the most obvious being Karl Marx. However, I think it is safe to say that for Marx, human freedom and human emancipation are similar in many ways, while I want to make a case for a distinction between the two.

conventional boundaries of political theory and intellectual history. Africana studies allowed for the new questions to be posed. But we should be clear: I was working from a specific current within Africana studies, one which was preoccupied with the critical and radical traditions of African and African Diaspora thought.

The editors of a pathbreaking volume published in South Africa, *Refiguring the Archive*,³ note that an "archive—every archive—is figured." They remind us that archives are both "documents of exclusion and monuments to particular configurations of power."⁴ But perhaps the matter warrants not simply refiguring—that is, figuring again anew—but rather *reframing*—that is, thinking about possible different meanings of archives altogether. In my own effort at reframing, while observing what historian Carlo Ginzburg calls "evidentiary paradigms," I have been preoccupied with working through new sites and therefore confronting the question of epistemological location. To put this another way, when archives are framed with the written document as god, then what happens when a different archive emerges, one that has specific features which are not conducive to textual readings and translations? For example, when religious practice (as in the case of the dual Haitian Revolution) becomes an archive, and there is no written tradition where "record keeping" is oral and the work of memory, then which protocols does one follow? The temptation, you may say, is to work through a specific religious practice, as if doing oral history. But religion is also about matters of faith. So how does the "historian of thought" examine such faith as part of a tradition of interpretation? All these issues became central as I made an attempt to write a history of freedom as both a history of thought and practice from within the framework of the "traditions of the oppressed."

In the end, I began to explore the possibilities of a different set of archives—art, music, religious practices (voodoo in the case of Haiti)—becoming undisciplined.⁵ One consequence was that the project grew from

3. Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2002).

4. Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*, 9.

5. When I say undisciplined, I mean that the work as it developed circled around the pursuit of questions, which in turn led me away particularly from political theory as a discipline. Many of the issues in the project really pose questions about historical knowledge and historiography in general. One useful work that attempts to grapple with this question of historical knowledge in a different way is Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

a single volume on freedom to a trilogy that includes a volume on freedom and human emancipation, one on the Haitian Revolution, and finally a visual multimedia exhibition focused on a comparative examination of freedom from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. All these issues swirled around and became embedded within this Freedom Project. I put them before you in this brief account because it may help to ground my discussion.

These reflections are an abstraction from the general research project. While operating at a certain conceptual level, they will always loop back to the concrete historical ground, in part because I do not believe that there can be any serious and meaningful thinking about the human without the ground of history. So I will be attentive to history while operating largely within the frame of critical thought. As a road map for these reflections, I am going to use my title as a way of parsing my arguments. Thus, I will divide this intervention into three parts:

- And what about the Human?
- Freedom and human emancipation
- The radical imagination

Part 1: And What About the Human?

In answering the question, "What about the Human?," it may be productive for us to historicize and think about the conditions for the emergence of the question in our moment. We live today in a strange time in the history of thought, particularly critical thought.⁶ I do not believe that it is quite the "dark times" of Hannah Arendt, who observed in the first part of the twentieth century, in the midst of political catastrophes, that there were "uncertain flickerings of light . . . that some men and women kindle under almost all circumstances."⁷ Yet it is perhaps accurate to say that we inhabit a current historical period in which, to paraphrase the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, "the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all convictions and the worst are full of passionate intensity."⁸

In this strange moment, perhaps interregnum, there is a growing crisis in critical thought, or what is often referred to as critical theory. This

6. I have argued this position in my *Empire of Liberty: Power, Freedom, and Desire* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England / Dartmouth College Press, 2010). See, in particular, chap. 4.

7. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), ix.

8. W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), 158.

is a time in which it seems that the "angels of theory," to paraphrase Stuart Hall, have congealed into a melancholic moment. Not a moment of mourning, because, as Freud reminds us, mourning is about overcoming, and in overcoming, we confront the ethical problem of how to deal with the past. Instead, we seem to be in a moment in critical thought where we are so melancholic that we construct absences; where we embrace loss, so that human life seems like a huge cemetery in which the names on the majority of the tombs are erased and can no longer be read. Melancholy has turned our attention to ruins, and many scholars have become consumed by ruins. So, particularly in the humanities, and within the domain of critical thought, we are entering a period of "crisis," where the danger is that the crisis will not be productive or generate fresh ideas but instead reinforces elements of our current theoretical scaffolding with the distinct possibility of leading us into a theoretical cul-de-sac. At the core of this "crisis" is not the so-called decentered subject but rather the *vanishing subject* and the growing exhaustion of the Western archive.⁹

Over the many years since Roland Barthes proclaimed "the death of the author" and Michel Foucault remarked in the last sentences of *The Order of Things* that "man is an invention of recent date and perhaps nearing its end,"¹⁰ critical thought/theory has forgotten that the death of the author was in part about the emergence of the reader. For Foucault, the human never quite expired, since in his later work, his volumes on sexuality and his lectures on the technologies of the self, freedom was linked to the ways in which one had to create a critical ontology of the self while taking into account historical limits and experimenting with the possibility of going beyond those limits. The "vanishing subject" has meant that in the cemetery, not only are the names on the tombstones effaced (and thus cannot be read) but, within the tombs, bodies rest without histories or names.

Within another context, the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén made the point in one of his remarkable poems on racial slavery that a slave body was a "corpse [that] lives."¹¹ Throughout my examination, I want to call these erased bodies *living corpses*. In general, I posit that one work of our

9. I will not spend any time in this essay dealing with the exhaustion of the Western archive for critical thought. I direct the reader's attention to chap. 4 of my *Empire of Liberty*.

10. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 387.

11. Nicolás Guillén, "I Came on a Slave Ship," in *Man-Making Words: Selected Poems of Nicolás Guillén*, trans. Robert Márquez and David Arthur McMurray (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 185–87.

current intellectual labor is to think about traditions of thought that grapple with dead and erased bodies which speak. I believe that it is a critical task of radical thought today to work with the speech of those who have been historically excluded from the history of thought. It means coming to grips with the speech and practices of bodies who, because of various historical and social conditions, were never seen as alive, erased bodies that existed in what Frantz Fanon has called a "zone of nonbeing." On these bodies, practices of violence were conducted that made them not sites of exception but rather sites in which regularized performances of violence as power were enacted. Yet from these bodies, seemingly corpses, there emerged a set of practices that generated thought. Therefore, to think of the "vanishing subject" as a frame for our current habits of thought is to disregard these histories.

And there is another reason. I have been arguing for some time something that is obvious but seemingly difficult to accept: there is an intellectual tradition which has emerged out of the historical human experiences of Africans and the African Diaspora. This tradition, which can be called "a black intellectual tradition," is not one that is "nativist" or "essentialist"; rather, it is one that has produced a specific series of questions about human life precisely because of a set of human experiences and historical circumstances. Intellectual traditions are formulated by the questions that trouble us as we live as humans. The historical African and African Diasporic human experiences pose a different set of questions that we need to work with.¹² In working with these questions, I believe we may be able to map, in the words of Paul Bové, "a topology of the human historical experience."¹³ It is in doing this intellectual labor, of paying attention to the living corpse and constructing this topology, that the question emerges, "And what about the Human?"

In thinking around this question, we know that in Western thought the figure of the human emerges around some of the following issues: "Who speaks *for* the human and who speaks *of* the human?"¹⁴ The emergence of Western humanism required a double obligation: a speaking *for* the human

12. For a fuller discussion about intellectual traditions and their emergence, see the first in the trilogy of my Freedom Project, *What About the Human?: Wither Human Emancipation or Human Freedom* (forthcoming).

13. This phrase emerged out of a March 2012 phone conversation with Paul Bové on twenty-first-century intellectual work.

14. See Wlad Godzich, "Who Speaks for the Human Today," *Concentric* 32, no. 2 (September 2006): 3–17.

and a speaking of the human. One can, of course, here recall the preface to Pico's thesis *Oration on the Dignity of Man* as illustrative of this double obligation. However, I want to suggest that there are conditions in which this figure of the human emerges that we need to be attentive to. The first is discursive. The etymology of the word *humanities* can be traced to the Latin *homo* and *humanus*, which in its original meaning meant a human being. Over time, *humanitas* came to mean the study of human beings, but in contrast to another word, the Greek *Anthropos*, which, although in its original meaning referred to the human being, when contrasted with *humanitas* came to mean something else. This modification of *Anthropos* seems to have been determined by the emergence of another important event: the understanding of the meaning of *civilization*. Raymond Williams notes in *Keywords* that within the English language, by the 1700s, civilization now "emphasized not so much a process as a state of social order and refinement, especially in conscious historical or cultural contrast with *barbarism*."¹⁵ With this shift, *humanitas* became the study of humans within so-called civilization, and *Anthropos*, the study of the so-called primitive. But as is common in the history of thought, there is a complex relationship between the discursive and the materiality of a historical moment.

The Japanese scholar Nishitani Osamu notes, "Since Columbus, Westerners have viewed novel varieties of people as children incapable of understanding Western thought/culture . . . these are primitives or if they can [understand over time] they are immature people . . . in this manner, the difference between self and other is captured in terms of backwardness."¹⁶ My point is a fairly straightforward one: that the creation of the figure of the human in Western thought occurred at the historical moment of colonial conquest and the emergence of the European colonial project. Thus, the figure of the human was constructed through conceptions of human difference already classified into hierarchical schema. With respect to political thought and intellectual history, we should of course be attentive to the centrality of Francisco de Vitoria's question, "By what right were the barbarians subjected to Spanish rule?" One should also note the debates between de Sepúlveda and las Casas about the rights of Indians, in which the Spanish Crown agreed that the indigenous population could be deprived of natural liberty and rights since they were "servants of nature."

15. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 57–58.

16. Nishitani Osamu, "Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of 'Human Being,'" in *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference*, ed. Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 259–60.

Aimé Césaire puts all of this very well when he writes that the colonial encounter was not "human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turned the colonizing man into a class room monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into any instrument of production."¹⁷ Césaire then proclaims, "My turn to state an equation: colonization = Thingification."¹⁸

It is this process of "Thingification" that preoccupies me, alongside the ways in which such a process engendered different forms of human expression and thought on the part of those who existed in this "zone of nonbeing." Because, if a human being becomes a thing, what the Caribbean historian Elsa Goveia calls "property in person"—and such processes are constructed around the appropriation of the body, not just the extraction of labor—then the "living corpses" represent figures and bodies that are not just simply and uniquely dominated by power. For these "living corpses," "throwness" is constructed around certain kinds of violence.¹⁹ Given the ways in which the living corpse is constructed, then, the question that emerges from this form of life is not who is a human; neither is it about who speaks for/of the human. Rather, the question that forces itself to the fore is, "What about the Human?" Such a question emerges because the human, as a figure with special meaning, is already assumed by those who dominate and enact violence, while the supposed nonhuman nature of the living corpse becomes the foundation on which violence is enacted. Once we grapple with this context, then, there are two questions that are intimately linked and interconnected. They are: "What about the Human?" and "What does it mean to be human?" Let me put the matter another way. What happens when we begin to think about and examine the "colonial encounter" from the perspective of the "living corpse"? And here I am not speaking about hermetically sealed worlds of slaves and slave master, "native" and colonial, which do not have any relationship to each other. Rather, I am trying to think about what happens when one opens a different archive, an archive in which one works through the "traditions of the oppressed," grappling with what I am calling the *archive of the ordinary*.²⁰

17. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.

18. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42.

19. *Throwness* is used here in the way in which Heidegger uses it.

20. The naming of this archive as the "archive of the ordinary" emerges from a series of discussions I have had over the last two years at the University of Cape Town. I want to thank Nick Shepherd, Harry Garuba, Heidi Grunebaum, and Siona O'Connell for these

When this archive is opened, how do we now tell a different set of stories in the history of thought? Such a procedure obviously turns the world upside down in many ways, because I am not here thinking about writing stories of resistance as the norm through a practice either of cultural or social history "from below." Rather, I am trying to think about what it means for the history of thought to work through the "traditions of the oppressed" and the "archive of the ordinary." In the opening of the "archive of the ordinary," a few things happen.

In the first instance, naming becomes an important problematic. I concur with Ludwig Wittgenstein that the "limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Since naming is so critical to language and signifies a form of power, then to open the archive of the ordinary confronts us with the relationship between naming and categories. Let me be precise here. We have named, more or less, a set of historical periods as belonging to modernity. But what if we think from the perspective of the "living corpse," who experienced "modernity" differently? Would we not have to say, as some Latin American scholars do, that one cannot think of modernity without colonial power and its centrality to a broader history we call "modernity"? Should this not therefore make us rename modernity as colonial modernity?²¹

The second thing that happens once we begin to think and work with the history of thought from the gaze of the "living corpse" is that the historical experiences of this figure can be described as "historical catastrophe." Here I am reaching for a way to both describe and name a human experience that cannot simply be understood as political domination or various forms of labor exploitation. Colonial power, racial slavery, and apartheid were forms of power that were not episodic, to be folded into other forms of domination. They were specific forms of domination in which power pressed flesh, in which the spectacle of violence was the everyday ordinary, making

discussions. They have also shared their work with me, which has been very helpful. These "archives of the ordinary" have within them both the everyday and the various processes of humanization that the "native" and the "slave" enact to live. They also include the extraordinary actions that seek to rupture in large-scale ways any dominant order. The relationship between the two is sometimes difficult to tease out but needs to be done in order to understand any social and political movement of the oppressed on its own terms. In my reframing of questions around the archives, perhaps there is no more fertile space for these discussions to happen than South Africa, where the stakes were/are not only academic but have important immediate political relevance.

21. For a discussion of this, see, in particular, the writings of Walter Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Enrique Dussel, among others.

the living corpse existence always a "state of emergency." For the "native," the indigenous, and the racialized body, Being-in-the-world was constituted by a series of repetitive traumas. As I have noted elsewhere, both racial slavery and colonial domination "created the ground and opened the space for another series of traumatic events that made history a catastrophe."²² Historical catastrophe, then, is not a final moment in a historical period, or a single event within time. Rather, it is the repetitive constitution of death worlds in which lives are erased and in which forms of domination exist, in which the human is "superfluous" over a long historical period. So, when from this ground of historical catastrophe the living corpse asks the question, "And what about the Human?," he or she does not begin by turning to the objects of their labor, nor seeks recognition in the ways that Hegel outlines in his Lord and Bondsman dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; I suggest instead that attention is turned to practices of freedom. So it is to that question we now turn.

Part 2: Freedom and Human Emancipation

The story of freedom in Western political thought and intellectual history is of course a complex one that still circles around the question which Isaiah Berlin posed at Oxford University in 1958, in his now famous essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty." Berlin states that "there have been different and conflicting answers to what has been the central question of politics—the question of obedience and coercion." He continues, "Why should I or anyone obey anyone else? Why should I not live as I like? Must I obey? If I disobey, may I be coerced? By whom and to what degree and in the name of what?"²³ From these sets of questions, Berlin notes that freedom is a "protean" word in the history of ideas. From this stance, he then proceeds to elaborate a series of arguments drawing on the writings of John Stuart Mill, Benjamin Constant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant to posit two conceptions of freedom, one positive and the other negative. For Berlin, negative freedom is about a *freedom from*, an absence of interference. Drawing from Kant, he argues that positive freedom is about a *freedom to* and includes issues of self-realization and mastery. This is a truncated account of Berlin's idea, but within liberal Western political thought, his frame still dominates thinking around the meanings of freedom, although it should be acknowledged that it has come under sustained critique within

22. Bogues, *Empire of Liberty*, 43.

23. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 121.

the academy particularly by three schools of thought: a neo-Roman, republican version of freedom, whose major scholars are Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and Philip Pettit; a second school of thought, a Marxist one, in which the late Oxford philosopher Gerald Cohen was an important figure; and the third school of thought is that of communitarianism. I will not engage in an exhaustive rendition of these schools of thought, but I will say this: all these schools of thought begin their critiques within the frame of the question that Berlin poses, of political obligation, thereby thinking around ways in which liberty is deeply connected to primarily political power.²⁴ For the neo-Roman/republican conception of freedom, the key issue, in the words of Skinner, drawing from his remarkable work on Hobbes, is that the question of liberty relates to that of "arbitrary power which reduces people to servitude."²⁵ On the other hand, Pocock and others propose that "freedom may be realized through political community . . . [and] is related to participation in self-government and concern for a common good."²⁶ Pettit has argued that while freedom is about noninterference (negative freedom), it is also about non-domination.²⁷ This non-domination, for him, has a specific characteristic, focused on "alien control," which has a negative impact on freedom of choice—so, again, here the issue is interference.

For the Marxist, the matter of freedom, while beginning with political freedom (Marx on the Jewish Question), moves to a conception of human emancipation, which resides in part in a *freedom to* (positive freedom): the overcoming of obstacles and the emergence of self-realization through the eradication of alienation brought about by processes of capitalist labor exploitation.²⁸ For the communitarian, the central issue is around what can be called the "common good." Here, while liberty is important, there is a ranking of political goods and a strong engagement with liberal theory of the "unencumbered self." Arguing that the self is always situated, Charles Taylor observes that the "self which has arrived at freedom by setting aside

24. It should be noted, however, that G. A. Cohen raises other questions. See his essay "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 3–33.

25. Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), x.

26. For a discussion of these ideas, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavelli Moment*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

27. For more on this idea, see Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

28. For an excellent example of a discussion on Marx's conception of freedom, see Carol Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

all external obstacles and impingements is characterless, and hence without defined purpose.”²⁹ The focus, therefore, is not about freedom itself but rather the frame of freedom in a critique of liberalism. To summarize: We can say that two questions, among others, were raised in Western thought inside these streams of thinking about freedom. The two questions circle around the distinctiveness of a political community and self, and issues regarding human alienation and self-realization. Now let us make a different move in large part because we are asking a different question.

The “living corpse” faced with the human experiences of historical catastrophe is not preoccupied with the question of neither political obedience nor alienation.³⁰ Rather, he/she is preoccupied with the ways in which various forms of near absolute forms of domination shape the human experience. Therefore, the question about freedom becomes one in which matters of interference, or non-domination, operate on a different terrain. This is not the terrain about the formation of political community, since the “living corpse” is already excluded from various forms of political community; rather, it is about forms of human life that extend beyond forms of political association, forms of life that do not exclude the political but rather locate it as one human practice among others.³¹ One of my arguments here is that forms of political association are an obvious requirement for humans, but perhaps, contrary to some conventional thinking, the polis is not freedom itself but instead provides frames and grounds for freedom. Thus, I suggest that it is from the grounds of political association that we are able to create what I wish to call forms of *common association*.³² My

29. Cited in Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 208.

30. The matter of alienation has a different valence for the slave and the colonized. For the slave inside a system of racial slavery, the initial question is about exile and forced migration from Africa, making the matter of alienation linked to questions of belonging. For slaves who were property, the issue of alienation is linked to their nonbeing. For the “native,” alienation works through what the African political thinker Amílcar Cabral, in his work on colonialism, calls the process of historical negation. Thus, for Cabral, national liberation is an act of culture, since “colonialism is the negation of the historical process.” See his remarkable essay “National Liberation and Culture,” in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral* (London: African Information Service, 1973).

31. I have in mind here as well two African novels that raise the questions of freedom as not just belonging to the political realm. See Zoe Wicombe’s *David’s Story* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001) and Yvonne Vera’s *Stone Virgins* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

32. When I say forms of common association, I am speaking here about a way of life that has the following elements: (1) practices of radical equality beyond procedural equality;

point is not that politics is secondary; I am trying to think about how freedom may begin in the realm of politics but does not end there. If one thinks about the most profound revolutions in human history, we would see that while political action and practice are always vital, the formations of new ways of life emerge from the ground of humans acting, working, through politics, to get somewhere else. To put this in more conventional terms: A perspective that historicizes humans and political practice in the end comes to terms, perhaps, with the realization that we as humans are not "zoon politikon," but rather that the political, and its praxis, is the basis for ways and forms of life. To briefly illustrate, I would draw your attention to two things: the emergence of the Soviets in 1905 in Russia, an event that took everyone, including Lenin, by complete surprise and was not immediately understood; and the emergence in the early period of the Haitian Revolution of the demands by formerly enslaved women of equal pay for equal work.³³ In both these events, a different logic operates from within the "traditions of the oppressed," thus making our story even more complicated. One consequence of this move is that now we are faced with more questions: "In what ways do 'subaltern' practices produce thought?" and "How can we as scholars grapple with such thought?" These questions have vast methodological reverberations, but if I may be allowed to sidestep these for the moment, I will instead turn my attention to the relationship between emancipation and freedom. I want to do this on two levels. The first is to pay some attention to the ways in which we have studied emancipation in the Atlantic world, and the second is to think briefly in general terms about a possible general relationship between freedom and emancipation.

(2) an expanded notion of rights, to include housing, health, and education, a bundle of rights that might be called social; and (3) the development of participatory forms of democracy.

33. Obviously, one cannot ignore the economic and the neoliberal moment in which we live and where all human relationships have been reduced to the calculation of profit and the market. What Stuart Hall has called the neoliberal revolution shapes not just our ideas of self and constructs market fundamentalism as an ethic but is preoccupied with defining many elements of neoliberalism as a form of freedom. See, for example, Milton Friedman's 2002 preface to *Capitalism and Freedom*, 40th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Kindle edition. However, what I am trying to think about here is how even in our most radical political moments, if we examine them closely, we would see that the question posed in these moments is not so much about political forms but about different ways of life that might be possible. I am therefore arguing, as well, from within the archive of the ordinary, suggesting another way in which we should review what one may call ruptural historical moments.

Within the Atlantic world, when we think about the "living corpse"—and here I am thinking particularly of the enslaved—we often equate freedom with emancipation. From the Caribbean to the United States to Brazil, with the exception of the dual Haitian Revolution and the quilombos in Brazil, the abolition of slavery has been constructed as emancipation. It is fitting at this point to remind ourselves that the word *emancipate* means, in its original Latin, "to release from dependency," in particular the son from the father. In the Roman *Digest*, *libertas* was about "freemen" existing "in their own power," not under the "power of a master."³⁴ To be emancipated, therefore, was to live within one's own power. This is very similar to a certain kind of *freedom from*. In other words, to be released is *to be freed from*. Patrick Chamoiseau, in his novel *Texaco*, puts well the limits of such a freedom. In a dialogue, one character says to another, "In fact Sophie my Marie, I who received it knows that Freedom is not given, must not be given. Liberty awarded does not liberate your soul."³⁵ Deploying the language of liberalism, we can say that emancipation may be understood as a *freedom from* and therefore has limits. Because of its limits, we may begin to discern the distinction between freedom itself as a practice and emancipation.

However, we also understand that emancipation is about having a new ground, one on which freedom can be constructed. W. E. B. Du Bois, in *Black Reconstruction in America*, makes it clear that for the African American slave, emancipation was not freedom. In that remarkable chapter "The Coming of the Lord," after writing in poetic terms about how the slaves thought that emancipation was "the coming of the Lord," Du Bois begins the ending of the chapter thus: "Free, then, with a desire for land and a frenzy for schools, the Negro lurched into the new day."³⁶ This new day was about establishing a new set of practices around labor and public education, and the creation of new selves. Emancipation made these new desires and practices possible, but freedom was the activity of the new beginning in an attempt to enact these desires.

If we shift our focus from slavery and emancipation, and begin to think about the general relationship between emancipation and freedom, I suggest we would find some interesting observations. The political theorist Ernesto Laclau has argued that radical emancipation primarily means "the abolition of the subject/object distinction." He also notes that emancipation

34. Cited in Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, x.

35. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 68.

36. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 123.

"is not . . . an act of creation but instead of liberation."³⁷ I would argue that the radical form of human emancipation is about a liberation *from*. There are two things here I wish to point out. First, if we agree that the act of emancipation is not an act of creation, then even though it breaks the mold of domination, the liberation from, it cannot, without the act of creation, construct new beginnings. So freedom and emancipation are connected, but they are distinct. Freedom as an activity of creation requires the capacity to create and the repeatable enactment of such creation; emancipation is a single act that constitutes a ground. I also want to suggest that within radical thought, the ways in which we have conceptualized general human emancipation is as a telos, a final act of release. What is deeply problematic about this is that with this telos, we seem to arrive at an end to human history. Perhaps we might want to consider that there is no end to the "dialectic" once there is human life, and thus there is *no final act of human emancipation*.³⁸ Given these things, to think about human emancipation, in the ways we have previously thought, is to work ourselves into a historical and theoretical cul-de-sac. I submit that it may be more productive for us to begin to think about *freedom as a critical human practice*, one that has no particular ending but is rooted and routed through a set of human experiences. There is, therefore, no final singular definition of freedom but rather a series of attempts to name practices in which humans engage within a set of activities to establish what I now wish to call *common association*. Secondly, in making this shift, we ought to observe how freedom operates like a strong word—a speech act in politics, one where, in the same historical period, there may be different conceptions and practices of "freedom" jostling and colliding against each other.

Let me explain with a concrete historical circumstance. Listen to John Adams speaking to a meeting in New England in the 1700s as he appeals to his audience to fight against the British Crown. He proclaims, "The people . . . think that [being] wholly dependent upon the crown and the people subjected to the unlimited power of parliament as their supreme legislative is slavery."³⁹ Note here how the language of slavery is deployed

37. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 1.

38. One of the difficulties with this kind of thinking is how it draws from ideas of human salvation and redemption. In the history of Western thought, there is still work to be done about the ways in which the emergence of Christian thought shaped the contours of thought.

39. Cited in Robert Webking, *The American Revolution and the Politics of Liberty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 88.

and that, as a consequence, freedom would be a release from the dependency of the British Crown. Adams, in his speech, links freedom firmly to issues of political obedience and the terms of that obligation. He constructs freedom primarily as that of politics and what one could call political equality within a frame of self-government.

Contrast this with Frederick Douglass's slave narrative. Writing about his battle with the slave breaker, Covey, Douglass notes, "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. . . . It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom."⁴⁰ Note the different meaning of slavery here from that of Adams. For Douglass, slavery is about a specific form of domination, one in which the master presses the slave through force. There is no mediating institution here. Terror is the order of the day, every day. Douglass continues, "I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."⁴¹ For Douglass, slavery was a terror in which the body was always marked and subjected to torture. Power in that kind of circumstance had to operate, as I have stated before, "in the flesh." One practice of that freedom was to break that terror. Thus, we have two conceptions of freedom, one preoccupied with politics, and the other operating on a different terrain, the ending of a terror of violence against the body. It should also be noted that the conception of freedom argued for by Adams allowed American racial slavery to perpetuate itself, and therefore included in this freedom was the unfreedom of another. In his narrative, Douglass writes about the "embers of freedom" that begin to appear once he breaks the violent terror of slave domination, and so it is to those embers that I now turn in my final section.

Part 3: The Radical Imagination

I would like to begin this section by noting a distinction between different practices of the imagination. In the first instance, the work of the imagination is reproductive. It reproduces our own "throwness," our everydayness, in ways that reinforce the various modes of our existence. In this sense, our imagination can serve to reinforce hegemony. Here we are working with Kant's notion of the reproductive function of the imagination. Donald Pease, in his book on state fantasy and American excep-

40. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed. Angela Davis (San Francisco: City Lights, 2010), 52.

41. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 52.

tionalism, has outlined how fantasy and the imagination operate to create hegemony.⁴² However, I want to suggest that there is a second work of the imagination, because the imagination is a *faculty of capacity*. In this second instance, the work of the imagination operates as critical thought. It imagines and breaks the boundaries/horizons of the status quo of the everyday. In this way, the imagination does not act in the ways that Aristotle argues as a bridge between ideas and images but rather produces new thought and desires. Fanon puts it well when he announces in the concluding pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence."⁴³ I would argue that here Fanon is imploring us to engage in the work of the radical imagination to imagine anew what human life could be like. He continues, "In the world which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself." It would seem to me that in the first instance, freedom is about these practices of self-creation, not as a telos of self-realization nor that of noninterference, but of a form of activity and human practice. This practice occurs on many terrains of the human experience—religion, music, and politics, to name a few. But I would also want to argue that the practice of self-creation is not isolated and is neither a means nor an end in itself. Recall that Fanon reminds us, "I am part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it."⁴⁴ The creativity of human freedom is about constructing forms of human association (common association), which to my mind are predicated upon another practice, that of radical forms of equality. It is why, we should note, the slave, the "native," always demanded freedom and equality as a bundle. In working through what this radical form of equality may look like, we move beyond forms of recognition of the so-called other. To my mind, shifting from thinking about the so-called other as the limit of identity and self, and refocusing on thinking instead *another* places us in a different space to begin to think about freedom and ways of life. There is, of course, an ethic at work here, but I do not think we can engage in any practices of radical politics today without being attentive to ethics.

In the end, freedom as practice, as a creative activity, operates through the radical imagination. Practices of freedom construct new ways of life for us as humans. Practices of freedom as they emerge challenge our theoretical scaffolding of the "vanishing subject." It requires us to ask

42. See Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

43. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 229.

44. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 229.

the question, "And what about the Human?" To begin to answer that question adequately, we will need to write an alternative history of thought. The Caribbean writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter has posited that "the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself."⁴⁵ This overrepresentation has a history routed through colonial power and racial slavery, and has deposited conceptions and practices of liberal freedom that today are organized into a hegemony. In this hegemony, freedom is often reducible as primarily choice without any attention paid to the determinate shape of choice itself. To ask the question, "What about the Human?" is to pose a different question about freedom. It is to suggest that freedom is grounded in a set of human practices that challenges what we are at any specific historical moment. Thus, there is no radical thinking about freedom without the human, not as a figure of essence or fixed human nature but rather as an assemblage figure of concrete historical practices with lived experiences that are deposits and sediments in time. I would like to end by returning to the epigraph with which I began.

When C. L. R. James wrote that he had become aware of large areas of human existence that "my history and politics did not seem to cover,"⁴⁶ he was pointing us to a certain kind of inadequacy of thought, one in which we study and interpret historical human existence primarily as a function of the political working through history. He was not simply gesturing toward sport (in this case, cricket) and art as additional archives, but I think making a deeper theoretical point about how we study the practices of the human and the requirement of a different kind of intellectual labor. In the end, I think the human species is at an important juncture: to answer James's questions demands that we grapple with a history of thought in which the practices of the "living corpses" are foregrounded. I have made an attempt to explain why.

Anthony Bogues

45. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257.

46. C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's, 1963), 149.

Copyright of Boundary 2 is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.