

## **Black Redemption, not (White) Abolition**

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A good place to start is with a story. This one is from Erna Brodber (1980), it is set in Jamaica, and it follows Nellie. She is in the process of liberating her body, psyche and spirit from slavery. To do so, Nellie must come out of her *kumbla*. A *kumbla* is a disguise, a protective device that you weave around yourself for survival. In a *kumbla*, “you can see both in and out. You hear them. They can hear you. They can touch you. You can touch them. But they cannot handle you” (1980: 123). A *kumbla* protects by functioning as a disguise, and more so, as subterfuge by dislocating its wearer from the harsh points of a dangerous reality (see Cooper 1990: 284–286). The *kumbla* “blows as the wind blows it, if the wind has enough strength to move it”; “it is a round seamless calabash that protects you without caring” (Brodber 1980: 123). In other words, the powerful protection that a *kumbla* provides is of a kind that ensures survival but does not nurture. Nellie was born into her *kumbla*.

Although Nellie’s great grandfather Will was from a poor background he came from white stock, and in Jamaica that fact allowed him to improve his lot. Will continued his family line with Tia Maria, the black god-daughter of the black maid who raised him. Will did not need to fashion a *kumbla*; however, the discrepancy between his social position and personal relations must have also produced a significant – but differently felt - disconnect in his orientation to the world: “[h]e was an abstract being, living in his head and his family and totally unaware of other tunes and innuendos” (Brodber 1980: : p.138). By contrast, Tia Maria did not look to the far-flung abstracted future, as Will did; she could only look to her direct and immediate reality. She knew that two roads lay before her: Will’s people or her own people, “and she knew who had power.” To take that road for her children, “she’d have

to learn to bob and weave” and spin a kumbla out of Will’s white skin (1980: : p.138). In the end, ponders Nellie, all Will willed to his offspring was “his abstract self and what cocoons we could make out of it” (Brodber 1980: p.141).

To come out of a kumbla is to dispense with an un-nurturing protection. It is to re-connect with and creatively embrace a heritage that has been kept distant, because, while that heritage is infused with pain and sorrow it also possesses healing powers for the living. To come out of the kumbla is to do more than physically survive; it is to redeem your past. So as Nellie comes out of her kumbla her ancestors tell their story. Some of them had refused Tia Maria’s weave, while others reacted badly to the material and had to shake it off. What is more, these spirits tell Nellie of the hidden sites - in thatched or open air tabernacles rather than stone churches - where they redeemed their humanity, and of how they exorcised the ills of slavery with sciences, arts, songs and practices not taught to them by slavemasters.

This practice of redeeming one’s own humanity is absent from the narrative of abolition, the dominant story used in the Western academy to imagine the coordinates of modern freedom and to guess at its content. The abolition narrative posits a rupture: the before-of-slavery and the afterwards-of-freedom. It also presents quintessentially white European and American elites as the agents who inaugurate this rupture between barbaric and civilized rule by fighting a fratricidal war with their un-Christian-like white European/American brothers/cousins. As such, their leadership of civilization is self-correcting. White abolition silences Black redemption. In this chapter we will refuse this silencing, and retrieve and journey with the practice of saving yourself.

Just as the fates of Will and Nellie are bound together, all of us who are implicated in the legacies of the enslavement of Africans are bound on this journey. The journey must, though, be sensitively undertaken. For some of us implicated via personal heritages it will be of importance to acknowledge that even if Nellie's kumbla cannot liberate, it can sometimes aid survival through its ability to disguise intellect and soul. And it should never be demanded that saving oneself is an exercise entirely open for all to observe.. For some of us implicated through socio-economic legacies, it will be of importance to remember that Will's relatively privileged positionality came at the cost of a disconnection from his surrounding environment and family. Will could not adequately understand the struggles for freedom in which he himself was implicated. Similar disconnections exist in the lofty abstractions of European Enlightenment and promises of modernity upon which we measure the worth of our thoughts and actions. But, however we are implicated in the legacies of slavery we must consider the following: if the audacity of freeing the individual from natural and social bonds underwrites the canons of modern social and political thought, and if, in this day and age, all progressive practices must proclaim to be humanist, then for the love of humanity, we must all undertake some kind of journey in and with the world of Black redemption.

As a hermeneutical device, "worlding" proposes that the fundamental task of understanding is not to grasp a fact, or even interrogate a social relationship, but to apprehend a possibility of being – to be oriented (Ricoeur 1981: pp.55–56). Orientation is not a task to be started and completed. It is a constant requisite for reasoning and imagining. By these terms, orientation is outlawed by the abolitionist narrative that demands its blessed subjects continue to face forward for fear of uncovering their own authorship in ongoing unfreedoms that they enrage over. But for Nellie, there can be no separation between the cumulated lived experience of her people and its worldly meaning. Hence, those implicated in the struggle

like Nellie will more wilfully use the past as their vision of action for present-day redemption – redemption here meaning both deliverance from and the making meaningful of the suffering of enslavement (Shulman 2008: p.259 fn14).

In this chapter we will cast out the lofty abolitionist narrative and ground, instead, with some of the orientations of the enslaved and their descendents. “Grounding”, in the Rastafari faith, is a form of reasoning wherein, amongst other strategies, interlocutors produce knowledge and understanding of the world through the hermeneutics of the sufferers rather than via the abstractions of privileged and detached philosophers. We will therefore dwell in wooded, thatched and zinc tabernacles rather than stone churches, read parchment scrolls of Black supremacy rather than definite articles of Perpetual Peace, and come to know the Black God of earthly redemption rather than the transparent God of ethereal Reason. Following Nellie’s path, we shall witness the growth of universals through the reasonings of the enslaved and their descendents as they articulate the meanings of liberation, justice and especially accountability. We will come to understand how these reasonings resist the categorical segregations found in the abolition narrative regarding unfree-past/free-present, saviour/victim, and damned/blessed. And we will realize that, unlike Enlightenment thought, humanitarian discourse and the pretence of the “international community”, these reasonings call *everyone* to account for themselves in the liberation struggle.

## **SONGS OF FREEDOM**

We will start, however, with the stinging critique of the abolitionist narrative provided, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by W.E.B. Dubois. His critique clarifies the stakes at play as

well as the heights of abstraction that must be bridged in order to ground with Nellie's redemption.

Forty years after President Lincoln's emancipation proclamation W.E.B. Dubois opined that the negro was still not free, especially in the South. In the cities, negroes lived as a "segregated servile caste" and in the rural areas many were still "bound by law and custom to an economic slavery, from which the only escape is death or the penitentiary" (DuBois 1961: p.41; see also DuBois 1995: pp.289, 595). Dubois even proclaimed that the key problem of the twentieth century was an international continuation of an old domestic problem, the color line (DuBois 1961: p.23). During the Second World War he would restate this issue of unfinished/sabotaged liberation: "The problem of the reconstruction of the United States, 1876, is the problem of the reconstruction of the world in 1843" (DuBois 1943: p.212). Much later, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Angela Davis (2005) would resurrect Dubois's stinging critique of the destruction of substantive reconstruction efforts after the civil war, in the main led by emancipated African-Americans, to show that meaningful liberation has yet to arrive for the descendent communities of enslaved Africans.

Dubois does not use the colour line to separate an unfree past from a free present, but rather to underscore present day unfreedoms and suffering emanating out of slavery. This strategy is sacrilege to the abolitionist imagination. It usurps the civilizational heritage that even today allows the dominating impulses of Western foreign policies to be expressed as "humanitarianism" (Crawford 2002), because such impulses are decidedly future-oriented and rarely dwell on the accountability of past actions for present injustices. In the abolitionist narrative, slave-holding cultures give themselves the gift of abolition, i.e., they endogenously transform into freedom cultures. With no need for atonement over past actions, "humanitarian"

ethics are firmly future-oriented, consisting mainly of the right to save the victims (especially women) of other cultures that it now indicts from on high as slave-holding.

However, this endogenous transformation from slave-holding to freedom-loving is exposed as fantasy when it is acknowledged that the “victims” themselves led the efforts for emancipation. And this is how Dubois cuts an even deeper incision into the abolitionist narrative when he makes the simple but pertinent point that while “white men helped and made possible the Underground Railroad [it was] negroes [who were the] engineers, conductors and passengers” (DuBois 1943: p.207). Dubois is reminding his readers that the enslaved had saved themselves, albeit with some help from friends. Furthermore, Anthony Bogues points out that Dubois’ reminder requires him to shift into a different heremeneutic than what would underpin the abolition narrative.<sup>2</sup> This shift requires some further reflection.

In *Black Reconstruction*, Dubois uses historical sociology – learnt at Berlin University - to understand the Civil War and the (thwarted) democratic experiment that immediately followed it. The first chapters of the book set up a Marxist dialectic in order to elucidate the contradiction between workers and property-owners and to expose the eruption of this contradiction in a struggle by the workers. However, Dubois also uses this dialectic to ground with the lives of the enslaved allowing him to expose a racialized cleavage between white and black workers. Moreover, the chapter entitled “general strike” focuses upon the subversion of the plantation economy by the black workers including tactics such as running away. And the chapter that is supposed to reveal the “point of arrival” (in Hegelian terms), i.e. the resolution of this contradiction leading to a higher ethical structure of society, is rather un-marxistly entitled “the coming of the lord”. Indeed, at the very moment when he tries to capture how the enslaved articulated emancipation, Dubois shifts into a poetic register:

There was joy in the south. ... young women, black, tawny, white and golden, lifted shivering hands, and old broken mothers black and gray, raised great voices and shouted to God across the fields, and up to the rocks and the mountains. A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side the seas. It was a new song. It did not come from Africa, though the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days was in it and through it. It did not come from white America - never from so pale and hard and thin a thing, however deep those vulgar and surrounding tones had driven ... It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like insense, improvised and born anew out of an age long past, and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and in thought ... [It] lived and grew; always it grew and swelled and lived, and it sits today at the right hand of God, as America's one real gift to beauty; as slavery's one redemption, distilled from the dross of its dung (DuBois 1995: pp.124–125).

Dubois is presenting the testimony of emancipation as a song. He does not detail the song's content. However, he does suggest what kind of orientation we would need in order to hear and feel its content. First, the song is new, something is being created out of the struggle. However, this creation is not a rupture (as it would have to be in the abolition narrative), but rather a new iteration of extant songs that express the African cultures and cosmologies enslaved persons journeyed with to the Americas. The middle-passage does not mark the geographical rupture point between tradition and modernity, barbarism and civilization. Hence, emancipation is Black redemption of and for this past. Second, emancipation is not dispensed with from above/outside, as it is in the abolition narrative, rather, it is an uplift: it grows out of the grounds of struggle and resonates outwards even to the heavens. These hermeneutic shifts gestured to by Dubois fundamentally disrupt the neat embodiment of freedom in, for example, the idea of the "international community" and espoused in a self-correcting, future-oriented, self-appointed doctrine of vanguardism (see Blair 1999). More important still, Dubois' gesture exposes the inadequacy of understanding the moment of liberation without confronting the meanings cultivated by those who sought to liberate themselves.

Let us briefly return to the protagonists of Brodber's story. The meaning of Dubois's freedom song cannot move you if you have woven yourself into Tia Maria's kumbla. The kumbla prepares you to always be an observer/consumer of the progress told by and about other lives (see Walcott 1974). It is to move only where another god's providence moves you, if it moves you at all. Alternatively, if, like Nellie's great grandfather Will, you have disconnected yourself from the struggles that you are implicated in in order to reach a safer level of abstraction, then you will hear but not listen to these freedom songs, and you will not consider them as a primary resource for adequately understanding the meaning of emancipation. This last point requires further elucidation.

Will's abstracted state of existence finds solace in Descartes, who separated the mind and body, granted the former universal being, and shunted into the later all particular objects that were "qualified" by adjectives (see Mills 1998: chap.1). The song of *BlackFreedom* identified by Dubois, rising from the struggles of the enslaved, falls silent somewhere in between these two states of being. In Descarte's schema, freedom in the abstract can be considered a universal, but black freedom can only be considered a particular, qualified by a somatic adjective, hence at best being considered a derivative discourse of something more fundamental. And yet, as critical race theorists have pointed out (past and present), non-adjectival proclamations of "freedom", "power" and "rights" are also particulars, only ones that masquerade as universals to the extent that their substance is drawn from racially interperllated experiences of these conditions, i.e. *white* experience (Fanon 1986: pp.129–138; McIntosh 1988; Leonardo 2004). It is the bracketing of the racial qualifier – (white) - that makes ( )Freedom supposedly a non-derivative discourse. Therefore its proclaimed universality is really the proclamation of white privilege, i.e. the epistemic privilege to be able to make your epidermis - and, if you are a white male, the entire body - transparent so



that it is just the abstract mind that presents itself and frees itself. “All this whiteness that burns me”, rages Fanon (1986: 114).

However, following Dubois’s lead, we could claim on the contrary that the song of *BlackFreedom* resonates more universally because it is explicitly grounded in an experience of oppression; whereas ( )Freedom has yet to confront the oppressive nature of its own prejudice. Will cannot face this confrontation; but Nellie has oriented her heart to these inherited songs of freedom. She is retrieving, reconnecting and reasoning with the sciences, cooking pots, herbs, tabernacles and melodies of her hidden ancestors. She will redeem the humanism practiced by them with a creative embrace of her Black God. And it will be a gift to the world. Let us now walk with her on some of that journey.

## **THE GOOD GOD OF THE ENSLAVED DEMANDS JUSTICE**

On August 14, 1791, representatives of the enslaved communities from approximately one hundred plantations met at the Lenormand de Mézy estate near Cap Français in the north of Saint Domingue. There, they plotted their response to the French Revolution the ramifications of which were being discussed among all strata of this, the richest of France’s sugar producing colonies. Discussions had proceeded through many different modalities and frameworks of cognition that reflected the diversity of positions within the Saint Domingue racial hierarchy. But those held amongst the enslaved were rarely made public.

After a premature arson attempt led to interrogation and the revelation of the plot to authorities, a further meeting was quickly organized, out of sight, in a wood (*bois*) called Caïman. At that meeting Cécile Fatiman, an old priestess of African and Corsican parentage, presided over a traditional Dahomean blood oath binding all present to proceed with the

revolution for liberation or death. Also present was Dutty Boukman, a coachman, who, as a Muslim cleric, had been captured in Senegambia and transported to Jamaica, there to make one further crossing to Saint Domingue and to emerge as a Vodou priest and leader of the enslaved. Boukman followed Fatiman by reciting a prayer:

The Good Lord who created the sun which lights us from above, which stirs the sea and makes the thunder roar – listen well, all of you – this god, hidden in the clouds, watches us. He sees what the white people do. The god of the white people demands from them crimes; our god asks for good deeds. But this god who is so good demands vengeance! He will direct our hands; he will aid us. Throw away the image of the god of the whites, who thirsts for our tears, and listen to the voice of liberty that speaks in all of our hearts! (cited in Hurbon 1995: p.45)

Historians of the Haitian Revolution have debated whether Boukman really said those words at that time and in that place. It is generally agreed that some sort of meeting at a place called Bois Caïman did take place, but that the details are shrouded in legend. Some even point to the fact that the written reports came from French hands; therefore, the prayer could turn out to be simply a French fantasy of savage revenge. Nevertheless, oral history in Haiti is much more affirmative of the indigenous roots of the story and also provides testimony as to the enduring, cumulative and living meaning of the episode and prayer for Haitian society.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, since 1791, Bois Caïman has been consistently mobilized in the political history of Haiti - by François Duvalier for an Afro-nationalism that was disastrous for the majority of poor black Haitians, but also by Jean-Bertrand Aristide to articulate his liberation theology that God dwells in the heart of the poor (Thylefors 2009). The prayer of resistance offered at Bois Caïman is therefore less of a French fantasy and much more of a sacred Haitian utterance, especially considering the amount of blood spilt for and around it.

The significance of Boukman's prayer must be contextualized within the era of revolution and abolition. Slaving cultures racialized enslaved Africans so that they became Negroes. According to Sylvia Wynter (2003) a major shift in cognitive boundary setting

occurred when slaving cultures “epidermalized” the sign of those who would be abjected from Christian Providence. Heretofore in Iberian Europe, the impurity of Jewish blood marked the boundary as to who could be considered beyond the pale of Christian redemption. The practices of Atlantic slavery radicalized this practice so that it was not unseen blood but the visible epidermis that marked the boundary. And through the mark of blackness, slaving-cultures emptied out the enslaved African person - now interpellated as Negro - of humanity. In British commercial law, for example, enslaved persons were legally defined as “things” (see Mtubani 1983). In short, the black epidermis marked the limit of Christian Providence, between those who could be counted as God’s children and those who were simply God’s animals. Even the intellectuals of non-slaving European cultures, such as Immanuel Kant (2010: p.21) of Prussia, accepted the verity of this epidermal boundary, proclaiming that the mark of Blackness was *prima facie* evidence of stupidity.

Abolitionists wholeheartedly argued that slaves were human. However, they could not rid themselves of the assumption that slaves had to be trained, possibly over generations, to substantively realize their humanity. Hence, William Wilberforce denounced the actual emancipation movements by the enslaved themselves as reckless and unreasoned, and therefore dangerous to the proceedings of the abolition campaign at home (Beckles 2007: : pp.124–125). Wilberforce envisaged the enslaved as passive victims that had to depend upon the sympathy of good Europeans for their deliverance – parliamentarians *and* captains of the slave-trade industry.<sup>4</sup> By this reading, abolitionists shared with slave traders and plantation owners the validity of the *prima facie* evidence that the mark of blackness signified a fundamental lack of humanity.

Boukman's invocation works with no such marking.<sup>5</sup> Rather, there is a humanism present in the way in which a critical lens is brought to bear upon racial categorizations. Such categorizations are not "deconstructed" by Boukman. How could they be, at the point of a whip? Rather, there is a more important and progressive distinction made between a) white people *qua* human beings and b) the spiritual forces that move white people to do the inhumane things that they do; in fact, although the white god thirsts for the tears of the enslaved, white people are captured by its malevolence too. The god of the enslaved, alternatively, is reasonable, defends liberty and pursues justice. The issue of accountability in the liberation struggle is therefore determined by which spiritual agencies you choose to move you, and not how human you are or not. Thus, accountability in this plantation time and place does not dwell in the abstract or as French rhetorical flourish ("[white] man is born free but everywhere he is in [metaphorical] chains"). Rather, accountability is critically broached by the sufferers as they actively, creatively and thoughtfully resist their own enslavement. What is more, with some sympathy, Boukman's invocation presents the slaveholders as victims of a bad god, yet their humanity is not surrendered due to their victimhood: like all of god's subjects, they must hold themselves accountable to the dictates of justice. All are to account for their actions at the crossroads of the liberation struggle.

Mention of the crossroads leads us to recognize that Fatiman, Boukman and others did not "find" a political faculty that night at Bois Caïman. Such faculties had been put into effect during the journey from the African hinterlands to the coasts, and had evolved in the slave ships on the middle passage and after embarking in the plantation colonies in the Americas (see Thornton 1993). Specifically, the reasonings at Bois Caïman were embedded in Kongo and other Central and West African cosmologies that began to syncretise into new iterations directly related to the problem of the living death of slavery. These cosmologies often

invoked the crossroads between profane and sublime knowledge, the living and ancestral spirits, and – in an innovation peculiar to the slave-plantation context - between Guinea (Africa), the land of everlasting life, and the Americas, the land of the dead (see in general Warner-Lewis 1977; Warner-Lewis 2003; Stewart 2004). From the late 1700s this connectivity – between American and African pasts and spirits – had cultivated an orientation to the Bible that rendered the poor blacks as both Ethiopians (the title most often used in the King James version for Africans) and as the Israelites to be redeemed from their Babylonian slavery (see, in general, Price 2003; Pobee 1997).

Let us now also stand at the crossroads and explore how it could be conceived that the good God might reveal itself in all its biblical Blackness.

## **BLACK SUPREMACY VERSUS WHITE SUPREMACY**

The good God was also at work in Jamaica, Boukman's point of departure as he made the crossing to St Domingue. In Jamaica, various Central and West African cosmologies had merged into the Pan-African healing faiths of Myal and Obeah. After formal emancipation in 1838, new syncretisms with Christianity emerged, especially Native Baptism followed by Revival. These were not testaments to a brave new post-slavery world. Rather, such faiths emerged in an era when descendents of enslaved peoples continued to battle against a tenure system still enthralled to the plantation complex at the same time as they lacked any political voice or representation in the governance of the colony. Thus, Dubois' critique of the abolition narrative in the United States also holds true for Jamaica in this era.

The response from the sufferers to continued injustices came in the form of the Morant Bay Uprising of 1865. Since Boukman's time, ideas and peoples had continued to

criss-cross the short distance between Morant Bay and Haiti (Sheller 2000). Paul Bogle, one of the leaders of the Uprising - and a Baptist minister - famously commanded the poor to “cleave to the Black” in pursuit of their liberation (Price 2003). For fear of a repeat Haitian Revolution, Bogle and others were hung by Governor Eyre, and in the aftermath, Jamaica’s Assembly was dissolved and a Crown Colony formed. Yet despite the new constitutional status of the island, land and labor conditions for its black poor hardly changed at all. Between 1891 and 1921, a Revival preacher, Alexander Bedward, identifying himself with Bogle, led the poor on another campaign for divinely ordained justice (see Lewis 1987). Speaking to a large crowd in 1895, Bedward claimed: “We are the true people; the white men are hypocrites, robbers and thieves; they are liars. Hell will be your portion if you do not rise up and crush the white men. The time is coming (cited in Post 1978: p.7)”.

Dispatching Bedward to the Bellevue mental asylum did little to arrest the groundswell of such movements. And so a fellow Revivalist, Fitz Balintine Pettersburg, returning from New York City in 1926 (Lee 2003: p.58) , picked up the mantle and published an esoteric treatise, *The Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy*.

Revival has its own interpretation of the crossroads cosmology, and is concerned with connecting the ancestors and African / Christian spirits – usually via feasting rituals - for spiritual, psychical and material healing of living communities. In most gatherings, rituals are tempered with active participation by the congregations through dance, drama, songs, oratories and possession (Hutton 2009: pp.58–59). Clinton Hutton argues that these feasting rituals run through Bois Caïman, Bogle’s insurrection and Revivalism (2009: p.62). Balintine’s scrolls are in keeping with these traditions. They reach across the Atlantic to

proclaim that Revivalists are uncommon people who have been “lightened up with RADIANCE” through the resurrection of the Kingdom of Ethiopia (Pettersburg 2007: p.12).

Balintine makes a great deal of the self-governance of his Ethiopian congregation. It is not run by white ministers, but a Black priesthood - “not the ORDER OF AARON, but after Royal Order of Melchisedec, THE KING OF SALEM”. This reference is important in so far as Balintine uses it to subvert the priestly order of Aaron with a more ancient order of peace (Salem) mentioned in the Old Testament, an order that is supremely faithful to the justice upheld by the Good God. Balintine then associates this order with the “Ethiopian Chief High Priest” to which “we raise the royal banner on the top mass of the four poles of creation, King Alpha and Queen Omega” (Pettersburg 2007: pp.10–11). Furthermore, Balintine takes the terms Alpha and Omega from Revelations 22 (the first-last, beginning-end) but personalizes them into a family structure from which the priestly dynasty of Melchisedec emerges (2007: p.55). This Black-Ethiopian family is therefore the first-born family of creation and distinct from the second-born white family of Adam and Eve (Pettersburg 2007: p.42) to whom humanity owes the concept of “original” sin (2007: pp.49, 60).

Balintine also differentiates the open-air yards and thatched/zinc roofs of Revivalist “balmyards” – centers of physical, social and spiritual healing – from the afflicted “adamic abrahamic and anglo-saxon Baptist churches” (2007: p.18). This differentiation of sites of worship is then politicized by reference to the legacies of Atlantic slavery. Hence, the “adamic Abrahamic and anglo-saxon” sites of worship support White supremacy (Pettersburg 2007: p.75); and indeed, “from BC 4004 to AD second score, [they] faked all Christianity” (2007: p.16). Alternatively, Ethiopian Balmyards are for the “assembly of Black supremacy” (2007: p.14). Black supremacy exists to triumph over White supremacy – “our

SLAVE MASTER” (Pettersburg 2007: p.16). Thus, while heavily articulated as a racialized order, Balintine’s esoteric text is a grounded call for global justice. So let us now examine this notion that, with respect to slavery and abolition, global justice is more adequately conceived of as Black supremacy.

## **GLOBAL JUSTICE AS BLACK SUPREMACY**

There are many strategies that exist to silence the songs of *BlackFreedom*; many different ways in which the abolitionist imagination comes to colonize moral philosophy to the detriment of all interlocutors. One way is to charge prophets such as Balintine with *ressentiment*, a term heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche’s writings on “slave-ethics”. Nietzsche contrasts the noble-man’s morality that grows out of triumphant self-affirmation with the negations of the slave who says “no” to the noble will. We have seen how at Bois Caïman this “no” was embedded in a critically *affirmative* humanism the universalism of which was distinct to that posited by the abolition imagination. Nietzsche, however, seems to have imbibed this imagination when he comments that, “psychologically speaking, [slave ethics] requires an outside stimulus in order to act at all; all its action is reaction” (Nietzsche 1956: pp.170–171). In other words, for Nietzsche there is no philosophy underlying slave-ethics, instead, they only testify to a physical reaction that disrupts the self-satisfaction of the master.

Similar imaginings also underpin Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial remembrance of Frantz Fanon on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. Bhabha moves only partially away from Nietzsche when he proclaims that the gift of Fanon’s writings is to offer “the master and slave deeper reflection of their interpositions” so that the tension inherent in a generic modern “self” can confront “the paradox of its own making” (Bhabha 1986: p.xxiv). Here, slave-ethics is



instructive not to those who specifically struggle for liberation but rather to the abstract (white) self of modernity.

On the contrary, Balintine's Black supremacy is not a reversal of terms, a Nietzschean negation, or a poststructural window onto a depersonalized (white) subject. It is more aptly, and in the tradition of Boukman's prayer, another kind of orientation suggested by Frantz Fanon. That is, Balintine's argument resonates with Fanon's critique of the abstract humanism that European intellectuals used, on the one hand to disavow colonialism, but on the other to disavow "violent" liberation movements of the colonized (see Bernasconi 1996). (This, of course, was precisely Wilberforce's position.) Balintine's scrolls posit a colonial relationship - the slave master and the enslaved - and claims that the *fundamental* nature of this relationship is violent domination. Furthermore, the scrolls argue that only the enslaved can transform the relationship itself. In short, White supremacy is the general relationship of violence; Black supremacy is liberation from it – first and foremost for the sufferers, but potentially for all who are implicated in the relation and wish to invoke another kind of spiritual agency at the crossroads.

Balintine also extends the imperative to transform a violent relationship into familial life and sexual relations. As I have noted, for Balintine, the relationship between Adam and Eve is saturated in original sin from which emerges slavery and domination – and by extension the hyper-patriarchy of the slave-master. However, propagating the most just and peaceful Priestly order, the first-born partnership of King Alpha and Queen Omega must operate on different principles: "you are now equal HEAD and Pillow-heart and SOUL life-HOLD COMPANION" (Pettersburg 2007: p.21). Balintine's comments can be contextualized within the past legacies of plantation slavery wherein de-facto family units

were consistently dismantled by slave-masters. For enslaved women this often came in the form of rape and abuse; for enslaved men this effectively made it extremely difficult to fulfill responsibilities to family and community. Balintine alludes to this directly (2007: p.58). With the legacies of these acts still present, Balintine maintains that “Black must not marry white nor white marry Black”, and that “[t]hey take your LIFE with their PRIVATE INTO YOUR PRIVATE” (2007: pp.35, 39). But while this descriptively reads as the same anti-“miscegenation” language of white supremacists, Balintine further suggests that anyone of any degree of African descent is to be first and foremost judged on what they do, and not what their epidermis confesses. In other words, in the pursuit of Black supremacy, all are held accountable, and this accountability must extend into the personal realms of familial life and relations of gender and sex.

Balintine finishes his scrolls with the following flourish: “Christianity and civilization is now Black supremacy” (Pettersburg 2007: p.75). By this proclamation Balintine concludes an interesting (but not uncommon: see also Planno 1970) argument about how it was that the good God could allow for Africans to be enslaved in the first place. The argument rejects the divine abjection of a whole race (including that of Hamitic or original sin), and in so doing rejects the abolitionist assumption that the enslaved have ever been passive victims. Instead, Balintine reveals that God’s first-born – Africans - sacrificed themselves to help redeem the white man of his Adamic ills, even temporarily giving themselves up as slaves for him to redeem. Yet the white man did not learn the lesson of justice gifted by the ancient Melchisedec order; hence, “We wash our hands of THEM, for life” (2007: p.45). Harsh though they are, these words are a response to a consistent refusal of slave-cultures to be accountable for the injustices they have wrought. Therefore, from within the hermeneutic of

Black supremacy, these words are not an injunction to reverse-demonize whites but a challenge to whites – and I would argue to all who have relatively benefited from living within (post)slave-cultures – to substantively address this consistent evasion.

## **REDEMPTION THROUGH A BLACK GOD**

The final step of our journey is to reckon with the manifestation of the good God on earth in African form. Balintine's scrolls are prophetic, coming to light in the interstices of just such a manifestation. They are written just a few years before the coronation in 1930 of Haile Selassie I and Menen Asfaw as emperor and empress of Ethiopia, and written just a few years after Marcus Garvey, a fellow Jamaican agitator, famously commented upon the lens through which the good god must be gleaned:

Whilst our God has no color, yet it is human to see everything through its own spectacles ... we have only now started out and, late though it be, to see our God through our own spectacles. The God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, let him exist for the race that believes in the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob; we believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God ... That is the God we believe in, but we shall worship Him through the spectacles of Ethiopia (Garvey 1967: p.34 vol.1).

Many of the first proponents of the Rastafari faith were Garveyites and Bedwardites (i.e. Revivalists) who saw in the coronation of Ras Tafari Makonnen (as Haile Selassie I) the fulfillment of Revelations with the manifestation of the good God in the African emperor. Indeed, Balintine's scrolls, albeit circulated in "bits and shards", were a key source for the cultivation of the Rastafari faith (Homiak 2005: p.89). One postcard of Haile Selassie I circulating in Jamaica during the Second World War is labeled: "Black supremacy emerges, Ras-Ta-Fari the Lion of Judah Reigneth" (Hill 2001: p.19). And an influential "house" of Rastafari – the Bobo Shantis (Black Ashantis) – have incorporated Balintine's notion of Black supremacy into their theological vocabulary, and model themselves after the priesthood

of Melchisedec. Their prophet, Prince Emmanuel Edward, articulates the divine manifestation of Black supremacy in Haile Selassie I thus:

God is alive for I am alive. I have no hope of seeing who don't even look like me. For I am Black so he must be Black also. A Black God ever liveth ever faithful, ever sure. I have heard that you have to die to see God. But I say you can't die to see nothing (Prince Emmanuel Edward n.d.).

How might we interpret these remarks? Traditionally, Rastafari articulate the living Black God through the pronoun, InI, which signifies the redemption of a three-fold personhood: the individual descendent of enslaved Africans; the community of African descendents at home and abroad; and the divinity manifested in this I and We (see also Afari 2007: pp.73–74). While interpretations are many and varied, mine is that the Godhead, Haile Selassie I, is the expression of this divinity that redeems personhoods from the ills of slavery. For the purposes of this redemption, a democratic-theocratic relationship holds between all Rastafari in their divine personhoods (see Tafari 2001: chap.7) And in the Rastafari heremeneutic, theocracy does not diminish but rather intensifies democratic impulses: in their liberation, all “ones” are accountable to themselves, to their brothers and sisters, and hence to the good god, but through (as Garvey argues) its varied and substantive (adjectival) manifestations.

We have now journeyed some distance. As a pedagogical device to review this journey, it might be of use to tell one more story, “Lament for Rastafari” (1983), written as a play by Edgar White and first performed in 1978 by a Black theater group from London called Keswidee. The play’s main protagonist is Lindsay, a young Jamaican who in his sojourn to London and then New York encounters racism and its destructive social, economic, psychical and spiritual effects.

One scene, an excursus, is a narration by Father Peters, an Anglican of a “brick” church rather than a balmyard. I suggest that Father Peters is living in a kumbla so as to disguise the abject mark of his skin from his Anglican brotherhood. The Father recalls how a boy tested him once by asking “if this world could ever be any different for a black man”, or would he always have to remain a servant of white men. Father Peters replies in a positive but evasive fashion such that the words of enlightenment come “too easily” to him: “A time, perhaps an eternity of silences away, when a black man can go anywhere or do anything in this world he chooses without dread.”

The boy tries to substantiate these distant remarks within his own lived experience. He asks the Father if he believes in a “black spirit which has allowed us to survive the white man’s cruelty.” The Father is not sure of a black spirit, but does confidently express his abstractly universal belief in a “common bond”. The boy presses the Father to further clarify what he believes in. The Father responds evasively again: “God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” And what of the things visible and invisible? The Father replies even more evasively that he believes in both, because God is surely invisible: “But *you* are God,” [the boy] answered. “And you can’t see yourself. Why are you like all West Indians? Why can’t you believe? Why a *white* Jesus?” Father Peters reflects: “And my mind failed me then, and I could not answer him (White 1983: p.23)”.

The excursus also operates as an allegory of the internal journey of Lindsay, the main protagonist of the play. By the end, Lindsay has redeemed his personhood despite the deprivation and racism experienced in the metropolises of slave-cultures. It is certainly not a victory – Lindsay finishes somewhat destitute – but it is, nevertheless, a moment of redemption. Lindsay ultimately manifests as a Rastafari mystic and proclaims the meeting of

the tribes, the thirteenth hour, the exodus from Egypt. But he does not plan to walk out: “I going to burn down Babylon, get out of me way I have wings” (White 1983: p.78). In the days of the Atlantic slave-trade, the Kongolese often oriented themselves towards the Americas as the lands of the dead. To return to the African lands of the living could not, therefore, be simply a profane venture but also an esoteric endeavour: one would have to be able to fly (Schuler 1980: p.95). To save oneself from enslavement was, in the terms given by slaving-cultures, an impossible feat. And yet, enslaved peoples and their descendants have practiced and do practice the “impossible”.

## CONCLUSION

The meanings of liberation and justice forged by the enslaved and their descendants in the heat of redeeming their own personhoods are almost entirely absent from the canons of Enlightenment thought. Those who articulate these meanings in their stead include contributors to the drafting of the constitution of slave states who theorize civil rights (Locke), legal facilitators of Atlantic slavery who theorize the law of nations (Grotius); and visceral racists who theorize on human nature, liberty and reason (Hume, Kant). These slave-culture archives evidence no accountability to their own subject matter. Alternatively, the meanings of liberation and justice forged by enslaved peoples and their descendants have been preserved for posterity in alternative archives – oral narratives, personal histories, geographical associations, folk tales, songs, rituals and spiritual sciences. They rest more in thatched/zinc/open-air tabernacles than in stone houses. Some of these archives are not openly available, but many are open and simply ignored. These alter-archives are a testimony to thoughtful, reasoned, inspired, grounded, creative liberation struggles against injustice; and what is more, they are principally accountable to their own subject matter.

Judged by the abolitionist narrative, these alter-archives consist of “unspeakable things” (to use Toni Morrison’s 1988 phrase), impossible feats, and unthinkable thoughts. But these things, feats and thoughts are only unspeakable, impossible and unthinkable if one is oriented by the fantastical and childish dichotomies of abolition, i.e., of unfree-pasts versus free-presents, of saviours versus victims, and of damned versus blessed. Would it not be eminently reasonable, then, to work with the hermeneutics of liberation, justice and accountability developed by those who have survived unfreedom against all the odds so as to redeem themselves, with a little help from friends? Why is this re-orientation – this grounding - so often unconceivable to a great many people? How ruthlessly protective is Nellie’s kumbula? How blinding, ultimately, are Will’s abstractions? Is it so demeaning to descend from abstract heavens and to follow, instead, the grounded universals of the sufferers?

In truth, this last question has been answered often enough in the past, but substantively rather than abstractly. One tenet of “worlding” put to music by Bob Marley, proclaims that “those who feel it know it”. Agitating against the Southern interest in the Civil War raging across the Atlantic, a representative of the Manchester working-class makes a simple but pertinent point: “... when the slave ceases to be and becomes an enfranchised free man, [then] the British workman’s claim may be listened to (cited in Rice 2010: p.97).” These workers are not enslaved, and their epidermis does not mark them as such. They have not had to protect themselves in a kumbula, like Nellie and her ancestors, yet they do not consider Will’s white abstractions to be wholly useful or even accountable to their condition and cause. Hence these workers find themselves in in the company of Dubois. Perhaps they are feeling a great song rising. After all, the universals deduced through abolition rhetoric tend to spot the earth like drizzle dispatched from the heavens, while the universals of the

sufferers tend to grow and orient like plants. White abolition is accountable to no-one; Black redemption is in the service of humanity.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the participants of the IR502 International Theory Workshop seminar at LSE, where some of these ideas were developed further. My thanks also to the editors for their generous, caring and constructive suggestions. This chapter can be read as a companion piece to Shilliam (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Bogue drew my attention to this shift in register during a workshop in 2006. See Bogue (2003: 69–93).

<sup>3</sup> For a representation of the arguments see Geggus (2002), Fick (1990), Simidori et al. (2002). I have also based the narrative here on these readings and the various arguments they represent.

<sup>4</sup> On the paternalist and conservative tensions in the abolitionist movement see in general D. B. Davis (1975).

<sup>5</sup> An alternative translation can be found in Heinl (1996: 43). I believe that the cardinal points I draw out are sufficiently broad to capture the spirit of the prayer beyond the discrete text.