

“It Was Just the Talking That Was Important”: Racial Capitalism and Black Affect in Walter Rodney’s “The Groundings with My Brothers”

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Abstract: Aspects of Black racialization have been sorely neglected in affect scholarship. This essay proposes a reading of Walter Rodney’s classic Black liberation text “The Groundings with My Brothers” in light of its generally unnoticed affectivity. Rodney’s practice of ‘grounding’ invites a reading in terms of affective relations between bodies. The compassionate stance and breakdown of class and racial hierarchies implicit in grounding suggest a new relational mode of being disruptive to the functioning of racial capitalism, which is contingent on the erection of empathy barriers to prevent the free flow of affective energies between its subjects. The textual body of “Groundings,” too, comes under investigation, as I locate ‘impressions’ of its author’s various bodily encounters in the rhetorical fabric. While its impressibility runs against masculinized rules of feeling, Rodney’s text still taps into exclusionary patriarchy. In the last section, I show how subsequent response essays ‘ground’ with Rodney, bringing the practice of grounding into intersectional and transnational territory and closer to its promise of bodily relations built on solidarity.

In the years since Patricia Clough first proclaimed an ‘affective turn,’ what began as mainly a scholarly interest in bodies and their various encounters has undertaken a rare migration from academia to the popular consciousness. We see a discourse of Black and brown bodies prevailing in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as well as in the larger cultural dialogue surrounding it (Peters). Discursively foregrounding non-white bodies in such a way highlights their material *situatedness* in a social structure wherein they are found to be stripped of rights, reduced to freely violable lumps of ‘dark matter’ (Winant). Conversely, the Black body discourse invites inquiry into the bodily relations produced by activists in protest movements against racial injustice such as BLM.

Let us approach by way of the past. Contemporary class-conscious, anti-racist social movements—BLM being the most prominent—stand on the shoulders of giants: generations of non-white activists and organizers who devoted (and all too often lost) their lives to the struggle for liberation. In what follows, I turn to one of the seminal texts in the Black radical tradition, Walter Rodney’s “The Groundings with My Brothers” (1968), finding that it constitutes something of a blueprint for novel bodily relations between Black subjects. I understand Rodney’s notion of ‘grounding’ as instantiating a relational mode of being that—embodying a compassionate intersubjectivity that circumvents classed and racialized blockades to solidarity between Black subjects—arguably disrupts the affective regime of racial capitalism and thus poses a threat to its entire machinery of accumulation.

It is uncommon in the literature on the Guyanese scholar-activist to see much thought given to the role of affective or emotional dynamics in his political practice. Through the various critical lenses applied to the man and his work—Gramscian organic intellectual (L. Lewis; Campbell), anti-imperialist theorist (Tilghman), composer of a new “political grammar” (Bogues 136), critical pedagogue (Vaught), renunciant of racial consciousness (Dupuy), “prophet of self-emancipation” (West 39)—he seldom appears as a man of feeling. Out of all commentators and analysts, only those who either knew Rodney personally or approach his political work via biography tend to be attentive to its specifically affective dimensions. Rupert Lewis notes: Walter and Patricia Rodney were “very comfortable in a social sense around ordinary people [...]. *People sensed this and warmed to them*” (10; my emphasis); Randall Robinson, in an essay entitled “Our Responsibilities to Each Other,” numbers several of grounding’s dominant themes: “empathy; awareness; respect for self; respect for others; constructive action” (III). These exceptions notwithstanding, the centrality of affect and emotion to Rodney’s work remains distinctly undertheorized.

This omission can be attributed, in part, to the curiously longstanding “refusal to admit the feeling world into the social sciences and political studies” (Thompson and Hoggett 2). Moreover, when the object of study is the work of a Black male (and a revolutionary socialist to boot), cultural stereotypes portraying Black men as ‘hard’ or emotionally inscrutable steer attention away from their emotionality (see Lemelle, Jr. 2). Pursuing this idea to its roots, we are forced to confront a social history in which the racial Other of Western society has been discursively inscribed by “hierarchies of somatic capacity,” construing it as affectively deficient against an unmarked, white center (Schuller 12). Tyrone S. Palmer posits that one legacy of racial chattel slavery has been to anchor at the cultural level a profound “inability to conceive of Black emotion” at all (46). This essay, then, is also an attempt to address the gaps in academic affect theory, which “has yet to substantially account for the problematic of blackness” (35).

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Black bodies, of course, feel as much as all others do, and what is felt has great impact on how they are ultimately *moved* to act. When we accept that “[a]ll political practices are affective,” we can begin to more closely approach the unique awareness of these qualities in Rodney’s grounding (Slaby and Bens 340). Beyond outlining an affective theory of grounding in the context of racial capitalism, I also read the text for traces of affecting and being affected. Read for affect, I find that “Groundings” not only strategically mobilizes emotional states to help deliver Rodney’s political message, but it can also be seen to bear the legible imprints left on the author by his manifold bodily encounters with the Jamaican working and underclass. I locate these imprints—‘impressions’—particularly in moments of textual rupture where the heightened affectivity of its author is recoverable and in moments where the author speaks in the voice of others. While my variation on ‘reading for affect’ may steer, at times, uncomfortably close to the abyss of authorial intent, it has the significant advantage of re-centering the feeling Black subject, in this case as a central narrative agent.¹ In the essay’s last section, I reflect on how the text—itsself a body—enters into a global affective economy in which it is, in turn, impressed upon by those who call attention to the exclusionary masculinity of Rodney’s (textual) practice.

AFFECTIVE LIFE UNDER RACIAL CAPITALISM

Early on in “Groundings,” Rodney identifies feeling-dynamics as essential to the functioning of white supremacy, explaining how “the fantastic gap between master and slave” existing in plantation society “was translated into a feeling on the part of the white slave master” that endures into the present day (64). With trademark clarity of thought, Rodney hints toward one of the central tenets of political affect theory: that every system of rule finds it necessary to manage the feelings of its subjects—to “arrang[e],” “harness,” “contain,” and “rechannel” all manner of “affective energies [...] circulat[ing] within a given social formation” so as to maintain the consent of the governed (Slaby and Bens 342).²

- 1 The focus on an ethics of reconstruction in this style of reading opposes it to a more ‘suspicious’ or ‘paranoid’ hermeneutics and hopefully contributes to the ongoing “recalibration of thought and practice” that is the ‘postcritical’ moment of literary and cultural studies (Anker and Felski 1).
- 2 For those unfamiliar with the twists and turns of scholarly affect discourse, it may be helpful to explain my own mobilization of the key concepts. Conceding that the field of affect scholarship “tends to outrun even its most encompassing and nuanced conceptualizations,” Slaby and Mühlhoff nevertheless outline three broad “segment[s] of affect-oriented thought” (39): the Spinozan intellectual tradition, centered on the relationality of bodies (34-36); the entanglement of individual feeling and structural ‘arrangements’ (36-37); and the “wild side” of affect, concerned with affect as pre-conscious and non-representational, the ‘virtual’ from which social change springs forth (38). My own approach, as will be evident from what follows, draws from the first two segments. Thus ‘affect’ is here taken to refer to all “encounters between bodies”—both institutional and organic—in which “their respective bodily capacities” to affect and be affected by other bodies are enhanced or diminished (27). ‘Feeling’ and ‘emotion’ are not vague synonyms but refer, respectively, to “the subjective-experiential dimension of these affective relations” and to

In the social system of racial capitalism, affective energies are arranged, harnessed, contained, and rechanneled through distinct dynamics of differentiation. To that end, preexisting differences within the governed population are as ‘valuable’ as those constructed by capital itself, such as class (Roediger 26). Historical materialists have tended to fixate on the latter, emphasizing, alongside Marx and Engels, the social upheavals brought on by the transition to bourgeois society that “pitilessly tor[e] asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors’” (37). Cedric J. Robinson addresses this oversight in *Black Marxism*, showing how an emergent capitalism did not constitute a clean break with, but rather grew out of, a European feudal civilization that “from its very beginnings [...] was constructed on antagonistic differences” (10). Long before the onset of industrial capitalism, there had existed proracial orders in feudal Europe based on “regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences” between subsets of European peoples, serving to legitimate slave labor in the economy (26). Only in bourgeois society did these differences crystallize into a definitive racial category, with American chattel slavery functioning as a key site (Haider 52-57). The “naturalized affective valuations” (Blickstein 154) inscribed into the notion of race effectively underwent a “slide of metonymy” from the intra-European to the non-white Other (Ahmed, “Affective Economies” 136). Capitalism’s racial character was thus baked into its very beginning.

Racialization lays the foundation for racial capitalism’s political economy by creating a “structural location” of “superexploitability” (Burden-Stelly). It also acts as an ‘affective fix’ for the societal alienation springing directly from the commodity fetish, wherein social relations between capitalist subjects appear as “material relations between persons and social relations between things” (Marx 166). Capital inadvertently patterns affective relations in its grim self-image, privatizing feelings and fostering (competitive) market relations between people (Fromm 3), leaving lovelessness, depression, and despair as the general outcome (hooks, *All About Love* 105). In the article “African History in the Service of Black Liberation,” Rodney again demonstrates that he is tuned in to an affective understanding of racial capitalism, invoking African cultures of hospitality as its opposite, which do not and could not “exist in capitalism which is based on profit motive” (75).

‘Affects of racialization’ (Blickstein) step into play to stabilize the volatile cocktail of negative affects mass-produced under capitalism. Simply put: Those racialized as white are induced to harbor ill feeling toward those racialized as not white and *to feel good about being white instead*, in spite of their own exploitation and alienation. Crucially, the difference between white and Black (or non-white)—who belongs to the in-group and who does not—is solidified *through feeling*:

“episodic realizations of affect, sorted into culturally established and thus historically variable sets of prototypical categories” (Scheve and Slaby 43, 46).

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Emotions “create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 10).

Arlie Russell Hochschild has described the way that “poor whites” in the American plantation system, seeing the “terrifying misery of the traumatized, short-lived slave,” were simultaneously pushed to see planters as “generous benefactors.” Through the bond of whiteness, they envisioned themselves as potential planters even though they were closer, materially speaking, to the condition of the slave (*Strangers* 208). ‘Feeling rules’ took shape around a capitalist morality that saw the racial Other as deserving of their fate and therefore unworthy of empathy, encouraging poor whites to ‘identify up’ along racial lines rather than ‘down’ or ‘sideways,’ as would suit their class interests (217). These racialized feeling rules contribute to the build-up of “empathy walls” (5) between white and non-white subjects, obstructing the free circulation of affective energies and reducing the racialized Other to the receptacle of a destructive negative affect that might otherwise be funneled into class antagonism.

In time, these feeling rules would be fully internalized by white society, the masters’ feelings of superiority ascertained by Rodney seeping into the popular consciousness. Deep attachments grew to the benefits conferred by (the appearance of) whiteness. To this day, being white affords greater security in the face of capitalist crises, where ethnic minorities stand in as “business cycle shock-absorber[s]”—“last hired, first fired” (Wolff). Such advantages are subsumed under what Du Bois famously called the “public and psychological wage” of whiteness (*Black Reconstruction* 700). As Cheryl I. Harris points out, “[w]hites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law” as “property” (1713). Even though this constitutes a purely relational advantage, in the sense that it is only salient because of another’s disadvantage, history has shown time and time again to which length whites will go to protect it (Manning).

The hegemonic valuative scheme in which whiteness is held above all else translates into stereotypical and degrading representations of non-whites in the cultural sphere. A result of the racialized empathy wall, these cultural ascriptions fix paradoxical qualities to Black people and their perceived capacity to feel. On the one hand, they are cast as Other for being “exaggeratedly emotional” and “hyperexpressive” (Ngai 93), while on the other they are not considered capable of harboring human feeling at all, standing “as a fungible object upon, around and through which affect accumulates, yet whose own affective power is of no consequence” (Palmer 37). The true inner life of the Black subject is effectively unknowable to the white in this symbolic arrangement, making of it an ontological object of fear; a fear which in turn “is the primary force upholding cultures of domination” (hooks, *All about Love* 93). The representations permeating

the social world are internalized by Black people and projected onto themselves and onto each other. The empathy barrier is built anew, this time on the inside, negating the capacity for self-love as well as obstructing the intraracial flow of affective energies.

In Du Bois's famous question "how does it feel to be a problem?" (*Souls* 1), the social world of the Black subject takes shape around the unmarked emotional center of whiteness. In a predominately white social space, white subjects are afforded the 'comfort' of inhabiting public space like a well-worn armchair. For the 'problematic' non-white subject moving through these same spaces, the experience is one of profound discomfort felt on the skin's surface (Ahmed, "Phenomenology"). The cumulative effects on Black subjectivity are deeply traumatic. Fanon's account of the shattering of bodily experience that comes with being racialized as Black has been influential in this regard, prompting recent investigations into Black affectivity centering Black subjectivity as a site of affective disorder. Such disorders are "activated dialogically by white society, and in particular, by the oppressive normativity of the 'white gaze'" (Blickstein 156). Again, Du Bois's insights are prescient: What is 'double consciousness' but the traumatic effect of internalizing the white gaze? 'Feeling like a problem' means always to feel ill at ease, visualizing oneself and those whom one resembles through white eyes, blinded by a total absence of empathy.

RODNEY'S JAMAICA

By and large, we find racial capitalism's 'affective arrangement' (Slaby), as sketched in the lines above, recreated microcosmically in the 'decolonial' (or rather neocolonial) Jamaica of Rodney's "Groundings." This is entirely unsurprising, considering that the former colonial periphery of the Caribbean took in almost half of the roughly ten million African slaves brought across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Barnard and Spencer 131). Nowhere else was racialization carried out as extremely. It stands to reason that formal independence (attained by Jamaica in 1962) did little to reform a colonial power structure based on extractive capital flows and ongoing racist sentiments. Taking over from their former colonial masters, the native elite held on to "discursive frameworks [drawn] from coloniality" (Bogues 128) and submitted to the imperatives of the global capitalist order. So while the newly 'independent' nation's strong economic growth may have expanded the numbers of a native Black middle class, the lion's share of surplus value continued to be siphoned off by investors abroad. The conditions of the Black working class remained unchanged, tying them to abject poverty and slave-like labor relations (L. Lewis 74-75; Bogues 129).

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“Symptoms of the colonial legacy” were bound to remain “at the psychological level” (R. Lewis 20). The Black working and underclass found themselves “force[d] [...] into a bitter struggle for survival in which the closest enemy is another struggling poor black” (Stone qtd. in R. Lewis 19). The retention of white wealth and cultural prestige at the top of the social ladder “encourage[d] pro-white attitudes as appropriate role playing,” with aspiring middle-class Black people often all too keen to comply, thereby “perpetuating values of servility and self-deprecation within the black majority” while projecting a disposition of “class arrogance” toward the lower classes. Unevenly racialized mechanisms of capitalist accumulation were upheld through the same empathy barriers of old, stabilizing racial hierarchies and, in effect, disrupting solidarity among the poor, non-white population. An accompanying politics of spatial segregation saw the bodies of the Jamaican urban poor cordoned off into ghetto-like ‘shantytowns.’ However, these developments were met by “increasing levels of racial and class militancy among the poorer classes” (19)—especially the Garveyite and Rastafari movements—as part of a global network of Black liberation struggles in the 1960s. Much of the social turbulence in Jamaica in this decade stemmed from the political elite’s attempts to marginalize a “black consciousness social movement” that was, admittedly, “somewhat disparate” (13). Said movement nonetheless presented a valuable intervention in an affective landscape that otherwise fed on hostility toward (mostly poor) Black people.

Onto this scene stepped Walter Rodney. The young Guyanese Doctor of History at the University of the West Indies (UWI) had for some months been seeking out the unseemly company of the Jamaican underclass in his grounding sessions, now the stuff of legend. After traveling to Montreal for the historic Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1968, Rodney was declared *persona non grata* by the Jamaican government and denied reentry. Rodney’s students at UWI responded to the ban by organizing a protest. Their spark kindled an uncontrollable wildfire, seizing large parts of Kingston’s disaffected population, causing millions in property damage and going down in history as the ‘Rodney Riots’ (Austin 63). These events occasioned the speech which came to be known as “The Groundings with My Brothers” when it was published a year later in a collection of the same name, alongside several talks on African history given by Rodney at the congress.

BEZIEHUNGSWEISE GROUNDING

In “Groundings,” Rodney not only polemicizes against a Jamaican government that has “seen it fit to ban [him]” (63), he also comments approvingly on the ensuing riots, contextualizes them within the broader history of racial capitalism, and delivers a programmatic statement on the role of the Black intellectual. What

holds these threads together is the practice of grounding, which Rodney first introduces as an element of Black Power, “a sitting-down together to reason, to ‘ground’ as the brothers say” (67). Though he sometimes stresses the cognitive-educational purpose of grounding, Rodney also asserts, unambiguously: “You do not have to teach them anything.” Instead, “it was just the talking that was important, the meeting of black people” (68). Here we clearly see the centrality of affect—of certain kinds of bodily relations that increase the agentic capacities of those involved—to the practice of grounding.

What characterizes the bodily relations involved in grounding? Early in the text,³ Rodney contrasts the Jamaican ruling class’s invocation of “a multiracial and harmonious living” with the experiential reality of the Jamaican people, exposing the former as myth (64-65). However, far from rejecting the ideal, Rodney acknowledges that it is, in fact, “what we are struggling for” (65). Here, German theorist Bini Adamczak’s notion of the ‘*Beziehungsweise*,’ which may be translated as ‘mode of relations’ or ‘relational mode’ (of being), is useful. In her book *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, Adamczak argues that the major revolutions of the twentieth century—1918 and 1968—put into place new modes of conducting social relations based on solidarity and cooperation instead of self-interest and competition—utopian relational modes that can be said to be truly ‘satisfactory’ on the level of the social (43). For various reasons, they each came up short and backslid into established patterns of conduct, undermining their respective revolutionary movements.

Grounding, I argue, embodies such a utopian relational mode—‘multiracial and harmonious’—which racial capitalism cannot deliver since it relies on differential mechanisms (empathy walls) that undermine solidarity and mass-produce disaffection. In the act of grounding, “hierarchical differences” between interlocutors are “temporarily eroded” (R. Lewis 22), conventional empathy walls toppled, and “a relationship based largely on mutual respect” (L. Lewis 76) and dialogue established in their place. By fundamentally rejecting capitalist competition as a social principle and the feeling rules that forbid interclass and intraracial sympathy, Rodney disrupts the affective regime at the core of racial capitalism’s accumulation through difference. Grounding embodies a radical empathy, one that is both anti-racist and anti-capitalist.

Rodney’s socialist perspective leads him to conclude that, in order to level the racial hierarchy, it is necessary to topple the class hierarchy along with it. In “Groundings,” he does so through a rhetorical strategy of self-effacement and

3 Even though I refer to “The Groundings with My Brothers” as a ‘text,’ it was delivered as a speech before being printed. Thus, my analysis at some times treats the speculative oral situation in which Rodney performed the initial speech act and at other times the textual artifact left to us. Consequentially, I refer to Rodney as both ‘author’ and ‘speaker,’ the recipient of the text as ‘reader’ and ‘audience.’

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subaltern uplift that translates into a transgressive spatial politics. Black people are cast as highly conscious of their own social situation (65), imbued with wisdom and beauty of their own (67, 72). The Rasta—regarded as the lowest of the low by other class-oriented groups (L. Lewis 79)—are inserted into the heroic lineage of world-historical subjects Paul Bogle and Marcus Garvey (W. Rodney, “Groundings” 65). By contrast, Black intellectuals who dwell in the white institution of the university, such as himself, must prove “to the people” that they are not their enemies (69). He speaks, accordingly, of the need for “humility” (72) and ends his speech by displaying it: “I tried to outline some of the things which I tried to give” (73). Rodney’s desire to commune with the Jamaican poor moves him beyond the borders of the campus space—a space coded in terms of bourgeois respectability (68)—to “anywhere that any group of black people were prepared to sit down to talk and listen” (67)—sports clubs, schoolrooms, churches, gullies (68)—making porous the spatial barriers that limit solidarity and extending his practice into a classless space held together by the sheer fact that Black life inhabits it.

The people Rodney seeks out are given space to talk before listening, but it is only grounding if they do both. As a bilateral form of exchange based on mutual respect, grounding differs significantly from the relations of market exchange and the interpersonal relations Rodney describes as actually existing between white and Black people. Grounding is not based on mere self-interest but operates under an affective logic of mutual empowerment, which is not comprehensible in the quid-pro-quo capitalist ontology. Concerning the racial character of grounding, Rodney posits that the “historical experience” of Black people has been “speaking to white people,” either “begging,” “justifying,” or “vilifying.” Affective relations (in the form of dialogue) between Black subjects simply do not occur in this scheme. The “new understanding [...] that black brothers must talk to each other” (68) is, therefore, akin to a tectonic shift within the affective economy of racial capitalism, channeling energies along paths heretofore prohibited—with potentially revolutionary consequences. As has been demonstrated, capitalist accumulation is partly upheld by reproducing anti-Black sentiment within Black subjects themselves; the stimulation of affectionate exchange between Black subjects tosses a wrench in the workings of the machine.

Rodney’s perceived enmity toward white people might be taken as standing in the way of the multiracial relational mode he aspires to by buttressing racial empathy barriers and obstructing the free flow of affective energies. Nevertheless, white supremacy, because it is ongoing, cannot simply be plastered over; it must be dismantled. Especially in a situation marked by open conflict between groups, affective dynamics of conflict are as essential to forming a political group subject as are dynamics of consent among its members (Bens et al. 47). What distinguishes the revolutionary mode of relations that grounding represents is that the desire for

relations of equality and solidarity outweigh those of conflict with one's perceived enemies (Adamczak 39). In the end, the aim is not to replicate but ultimately to expunge differential valuations of human life.

For Rodney, Black intellectuals straddle the social worlds of white and Black. As such, they find themselves in a position that is at once difficult to navigate and rife with opportunity. He proposes that they ought to refuse the temptations of consumerism and put their knowledge to use in the struggle for Black liberation. He names three core functions to be performed by the Black intellectual: correcting the distortions of “white cultural imperialism” within scholarship, “challeng[ing] the social myth” of existing multiracial society (66), and “attach[ing] himself to the activity of the black masses” (67). The first two functions are educative and anti-hegemonic, locating the intellectual in the cultural war of position. The last function, however, makes sense in affective terms alone. By attaching themselves to the movements of the masses, the Black intellectual is to act as an ‘affective potentiator’—one who increases the capacities of others to affect and be affected. Such a perspective reveals the affective component embedded in the first two functions. The disempowerment of Black people is embedded in valuative affective dynamics. Targeting the cultural bases of these valuations may increase the dominated group's potential to act, which in turn generates increased interest in scholarship and cultural representations challenging the hegemonic line.

Some of the strongest evidence for Rodney's efficacy as an affective potentiator (and thus also for the strategic validity of grounding as a method) can be found in his biography. Rodney practiced as he preached, living in and operating from the working-class community at Trafalgar Park (Vaught). As Walter Rodney's widow, Patricia, relates: “One cannot measure the organic and intimately personal connection Walter had and felt with his brethren as he immersed himself in the historical context of their condition. He was profoundly changed by their struggles” (qtd. in R. Robinson 110). For Rodney, as a consequence, grounding evolved from “practice” to an entire “way of living” (P. Rodney 77). Forging strong links with the urban youth of Kingston and especially the Rastafari—by no means an easy feat (R. Lewis 21, 39)—he grew increasingly committed to the relational mode of grounding, demonstrating that his power to affect grew in equal measure to the magnitude of his own affection. The erupting riots following Rodney's physical separation from those he had fashioned bonds with (students, workers, criminals) reveal his power as an affective potentiator.

It is significant that Rodney should choose this biographical episode to frame the arguments he makes in “The Groundings with My Brothers,” as it speaks to its emotional impact on the author and provides evidence for those very arguments. Moreover, the phrasing of the title captures the inherent relationality of being, which Rodney subscribed to politically and personally, and it stands in direct

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contradiction to the prevailing capitalist-liberal ideology that posits humans as discrete, self-interested individuals. As Randall Robinson observes, Rodney’s grounding thus “ma[kes] manifest the Ubuntu philosophy underlying so many African cultures: the belief that we discover our true humanity not in lives of isolation, but via our relations with other human beings” (110).

THE IMPRESSIBILITY OF WALTER RODNEY

Impressions of the bodily encounters that left Rodney so “profoundly changed” are legible as textual traces of prior bodily affections. Conceiving of these encounters as impressions “allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 11). In Rodney’s text, the impressions perhaps ought to be distinguished from technical descriptions of affective states and (as far as this is possible) from the performative manipulation of affects, which is the time-tested technique of the skillful orator. To take one example, Rodney conjures up an “atmosphere of fear” (64) enshrouding the Jamaican government, with the effect of eroding their support within the population rhetorically. Satirical comments serve to destabilize the government’s authority further and channel the speaker’s disdain through ridicule: “I hope Stokely does not go and write a book on cookery or some such thing. It would be banned in Jamaica” (65-66). The humorous affective states provoked by such insertions seduce recipients into forming attachments to the political messages conveyed by the speaker. Not least, by juxtaposing the government’s seeming irrationality (“it does not give reasons for things” [70]) with the innate reasonableness of grounding, Rodney upends the commonsense distinction between reason and feeling. In doing so, he questions central precepts of political theory, which legitimize the rule of a supposedly equanimous state over an unruly mob guided by unrestrained emotion. In the end, however, it is not this strategically evoked emotion but the one that is ‘betrayed’ that reveals the speaker’s affective state.

Several moments in “Groundings” can be discerned to ‘glow’ in ways that are indicative of the presence of heightened affective involvement (see Knudsen and Stage 7). I identify several “*ruptures*” in the “*normal discourse*” of Rodney’s speech that can be read in terms of “affectivity as *bodily gestures* of being” (9). In recounting his grounding trips to the quarters of the Jamaican lower classes, Rodney gives a noticeably detailed account and imaginatively reexperiences his voyage into subaltern space: “I have spoken in what people call ‘dungle,’ rubbish dumps, for that is where people live in Jamaica” (68). He expresses his outrage at the living arrangements of the poor, stoking the same emotion in the audience, before

introducing the government as the object of this shared emotion.⁴ The line of argument becomes tangled in this section compared to the preceding paragraphs in which Rodney outlines various functions of the Black intellectual in an academically systematic fashion. The speaker oscillates between reminiscence of the Jamaican slum and invective against the government in a manner suggesting a “*destabilization of affective energy* in relation to specific spaces and [...] sites,” indicating heightened affectivity (Knudsen and Stage 9). The textual space collapses into an emotional matrix of anger and empathy that culminates in this remarkable image: “I have sat on a little oil drum, rusty and in the midst of garbage, and some black brothers and I have grounded together” (W. Rodney, “Groundings” 68). Vivid and full of pathos, the image of the professor on the “little oil drum” drips affective charge, forming the objective correlative to a relational mode of being that aims at the erosion of (class) hierarchies. Language too is a leveler here: The first-person singular pronoun that ushers in the sentence is absolved by a conjunctive construction that puts the “black brothers” in a privileged position. Rodney continues: “But we spoke, we spoke about a lot of things, and it was just the talking that was important, the meeting of black people. I was trying to contribute something: I was trying to contribute my experience in travelling, in reading, my analysis: and I was also gaining” (68-69). The “*rhythmic intensification*” of Rodney’s contracting clauses as well as the “*entrainment*” of sentence fragments and repeated words “*through a common pulse*” (Knudsen and Stage 9) hint at a speech situation affectively enlivened by the speaker’s recollection of his lived experience of grounding.

Nearing the end of Rodney’s speech, the impressions of past groundings manifest themselves outrightly. Momentum builds toward an emotional crescendo. Drawing attention to the speech act in progress, Rodney tells his audience: “*I would like to feel perhaps* that what I am saying in one form or another will reach the brothers [in Jamaica], and therefore it is a message both to you and to them” (Rodney 71; my emphasis). Though the passage is easily overread, the particular phrasing speaks to a hesitation, a momentary insecurity that can be transcended only through the ardor of the speaker’s desire for connection with his (imagined) addressees. The affective bonds that spawn riots on one end manifest on the other as the speaker’s desire to reach across a vast distance, substituting the collective body of the audience with one much further removed. One cannot overlook the impressions left by one group of bodies in particular:

You have to speak to Jamaican Rasta, and you have to listen to him,
listen very carefully, and then you will hear him tell you about the
Word... You have to listen to them, and you hear them talk about

4 We see the difficulty in distinguishing between strategic displays of feeling and ‘betrayed’ ones: Since Rodney’s politics is fundamentally a matter of affective disposition, inadvertent affects can have the same potency in his argument as if they had been deployed strategically.

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cosmic power and it rings a bell, I say, but I have read this somewhere,
this is Africa. You have to listen to their drums to get the message of
the cosmic power. (71-72)

The imprints of Rodney’s encounters with the Rastafari subculture are all over “Groundings.” Again exhibiting intense rhythmicity and entrainment around the phrase “You have to listen,” Rodney compels his audience to seek out the wisdom of the Rasta. Rastafarian cosmology has impressed upon him deeply, shown by incorporating the ‘Word’ into his own speech and thought; elsewhere, he speaks of “Babylonian captivity” (66). As Bogues puts it, we see Rodney in the process of “learning both the new language in which [the subalterns] speak as well as the ideas they promulgate” (145). Speaking Rasta’s ‘Word,’ Rasta speaks through him. Instead of identifying up, Rodney identifies down with the lowest of the low in the Jamaican social setting, choosing to love and “find [himself] in the other” (hooks, *All about Love* 93), who is typically considered beyond love in the affective arrangement of racial capitalism. What is gained from giving one’s attention, lovingly, to the Rasta, Rodney goes on to say, is humility: “[K]now you get humility, because look who you are learning from” (72). The self-effacement embodied by this posture of humility runs counter to affective dynamics in which subjects are structurally encouraged to invest emotionally into their class privilege.

Moving into the last part of his speech, Rodney reflects on the “miracle” that is the life force of subaltern Jamaica:

[T]hese are brothers who, up to now, are every day performing a miracle. It is a miracle how those fellows live. They live and they are physically fit, they have a vitality of mind, they have a tremendous sense of humour, they have depth. How do they do that in the midst of the existing conditions? And they create; they are always saying things. [...] Black people who have suffered all these years create. That is amazing. (73)

How Rodney ranges over the admirable qualities of the downtrodden, darting from observation to observation with faltering coherence, discloses a mind in a state of agitation. The affective state expressed in these lines’ emotional and verbal excess, in which feelings of amazement, love, and wonder come together, may be labeled as exaltation. Rodney will have been most affected at this point in the speech, and, by consequence, so will the audience (this reader’s experience seems to suggest as much). It would be difficult to experience an emotional outburst of this kind and believe Black people incapable of true feeling; part of the text’s work is thus also to subvert popular misconceptions about the non-white subject as defective in terms of affect (not to mention intellect).

Rodney sketches a novel relational mode or way of life in this short speech, recognizing the relationality of being inherent to affect and the potentially

liberatory power that comes from nurturing these relations. That is why grounding is synonymous with Black Power. It erodes hierarchies and empowers subaltern Black people by giving them the chance to share their own knowledge. As an intensely affective political practice, grounding reprograms affective valuations that go with being racialized in a capitalist system, generating solidarity with the lowest of the low in ways that must be considered critically disruptive of accumulation. Rodney's expulsion from Jamaica attests to the economic elite's fear at the prospect of the alternative relational modes he was testing out in practice. The ensuing riots show they had all reason to be. Indeed, Rodney's entire life, violently cut short by the dictatorial Burnham regime in Guyana, stands as a monument to his capacities as an affective potentiator. So do the legible impressions left on "Groundings" by Rodney's various bodily encounters with the working and lumpen poor of Kingston, Jamaica.

GROUNDING "GROUNDINGS"

In an analogy that is near at hand, the text itself constitutes an act of grounding with its readership. As textual artifact—fossilized speech—its impressibility is inevitably of a different kind than that of a body of flesh and blood. David Austin points out that Rodney's text "played a big part in grounding and lending direction to countless others" (65).⁵ However, for that to be the case, it has to 'listen' to what others have to say to it before it can expect to 'speak' and be 'heard.' With a literary text, this sort of dialogue is most closely approximated by the act of writing back. As it were, Rodney's "Groundings with My Brothers" has prompted several scholarly and activist responses down the line. Most notable have been those exploring Rodney's exclusive focus on masculine relations in his (textual) practice. Not once are the plight of Black women or their role in the movement considered in Rodney's analysis of the Jamaican situation, nor does he address them in any perceptible way.

Even when the utopian longing for community among equals has been strongest within them, socialists of all colors have too often perpetuated patriarchal domination (Adamczak 39). Indeed, the Combahee River Collective, in their famous 1977 statement, linked the genesis of the Black Feminist movement to the profound "disillusionment" they felt at the manifest sexism in Black liberation movements (17). Without absolving them of their responsibility in perpetuating patriarchal oppression, bell hooks explains that "black males endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity," constructed in the hegemonic culture in "the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking,

⁵ See also Campbell 61, and Shepherd 102–05, who track the circulation of Rodney's work within a transnational and transhistorical affective economy.

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and unfeeling” (*We Real Cool* x). Even if Rodney rebels against social indictments to publicly express feelings and form male relationships that do not adhere to prevailing masculinist feeling rules, he is unable to escape the shadow of patriarchy entirely. At worst, this risks sidling into a “complicit masculinity” that contributes to the perpetuation of male dominance over women (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). What is more, hooks ultimately sees the Black power movement’s “embrace of patriarchal masculinity” as having undermined the struggle for racial uplift (*We Real Cool* 14).

The two response essays with which I would like to close the discussion of “Groundings” are very much informed by the Black Feminist tradition. As it happens, they bear the same title: “The Groundings with My Sisters.” The first, by Manning Marable, appeared in 1983 as a chapter in his *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, a book that bears the unmistakable imprint of Rodney’s influential *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Marable holds that those whom Rodney idolizes in “Groundings,” among them Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael, “were disturbed with the evolutionary transformation in sex roles” that occurred during their lifetimes and themselves perpetuated patriarchy (83). Addressing the ideological oversight of Black liberation movements, Marable relates the depths of Black women’s dual experience of oppression and celebrates their contributions to the radical tradition that were largely “ignored, or relegated to second class status by most Black male activists” (103). It is the task of “Black male liberationists [to] relearn their own history, by grounding themselves in the wisdom of their sisters” (70). Although Marable, oddly enough, does not mention Rodney by name anywhere in the chapter, he is plainly implicated by the textual frame.

In her essay, Keisha-Khan Y. Perry treads similar ground, though her scholarly interest lies in Latin America. She laments the erasure of Black radical women from the memory and historiography of the political Left despite their profound contributions to anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements. While she takes her title from Marable, she engages more explicitly with Rodney. In her own words, Perry’s appropriation of the title “expresses both [her] recognition of the interrelated complex experiences of black women globally and how this political positioning informs feminist and diasporic solidarity.” She projects grounding onto a truly global scale, taking it as the conceptual linchpin in a transnational effort to build affective relations of solidarity across the Black diaspora, hoping to fashion Black Feminism into something like a “global sisterhood.” Not only does Perry flip grounding’s gender bias on its head (or the right way up?), she also dissolves its physical barriers to create a global affective community binding together Black women at the farthest corners of the earth.

These rejoinders by Marable and Perry leave deep marks on Rodney's original text. Once they are introduced as intertextual reference points, we can no longer claim readerly innocence; they force us to confront the limits of Rodney's practice precisely because we identify with his fundamental struggle for a harmonious way of life. It is widely recognized that gender performs a similar function within capitalist accumulation as race does, producing difference in order to devalue certain types of work, not least by undermining solidarity between (racialized and gendered) segments of the global working class (Manning). The longing for satisfactory modes or relations, which is expressed in the practice of grounding, must therefore seek to overcome the division of the world into mutually exclusive realms of masculinity and femininity, just as it seeks to go beyond the realms of Blackness and whiteness (see Adamczak 40-41). Only if its purveyors are open to grounding themselves in the 'sisters' wisdom' can the vision of a novel relational mode be made to deliver on its foundational promise. Committed as he was to grounding as a way of life, Rodney would surely have welcomed the invitation.

CONCLUSION

Writing of the Jamaican Left's political strategy in the 1960s, Rupert Lewis observes that "[i]ts fatal flaw" was "to ignore the psycho-social and psycho-political dimension of the colonial experience which were embodied in national debates about culture and identity" (38). There is at least one individual he exempts from the charge. Walter Rodney distinguished himself from his revolutionary socialist peers by grasping the racialized affective disorders plaguing the Caribbean society of his day. With "Groundings," he proposed a remedy in the form of an alternative manner of conducting relations among Black people, which, if certainly not without its limits, presents a strategy for overcoming racial capitalism. If only the empathy barriers erected by racial and patriarchal capitalism could be torn down, the free circulation of affective energies would bring the machinery of accumulation to a standstill.

When Tilghman asks whether "Rodney's philosophy [is] still relevant" in this "era of neoliberal globalization" (254), the standpoint taken in this essay prompts an affirmative answer. A harmonious way of living has yet to be put into practice, to say the least. Non-white bodies are still sacrificed in the imperial core and the subjugated periphery of the racial-capitalist world system. The popular uprisings under the banner of Black Lives Matter speak to that truth. At the outset of this paper, I held that Rodney's "Groundings" provides a practical framework—which I have expanded upon theoretically—that can prove useful in our present moment. To an extent, the lessons of Walter Rodney have already been learned. To hear Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor say it: "Today [...] the face of the Black Lives Matter

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movement is largely queer and female” (165). The movement’s organizers, moreover, “are ‘intersectional’ in their approach to organizing—in other words, they start from the basic recognition that the oppression of African Americans is multidimensional and must be fought on different fronts” (167). The empathy barriers obstructing the free flow of affective energies from body to body, which once dragged down the struggle for Black liberation, are here beginning to crumble.

We can only understand the relevance of Walter Rodney when we open up to the idea that his legacy is a political practice mired in bodily feeling. What can be taken from Rodney’s practice of grounding is the love of the other. From this affect flows an absolute commitment to political emancipation as well as a method: putting one’s body ‘on the line’—where it is not expected to be, where vested power interests would prefer it not to be, earnestly seeking out connections with other bodies that are unlike one’s own, increasing the power of both. In these connections, the readiness to be impressed upon shall be as strong as the will to impress, resulting in humility. Ultimately, grounding is a politics of feeling, and without it, no serious change to our political system is imaginable.

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