

What's My Name?

Black Vernacular Intellectuals

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INTRODUCTION

Thinking in the Vernacular

Who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Vernacularize. Explore and explicate the links between the popular and the political. Never underestimate the capacity of the popular to elucidate the ideological, to animate the political, never overlook the vernacular as a means of producing a subaltern or postcolonial voice that resists, subverts, disrupts, reconfigures, or impacts the dominant discourse. For disempowered constituencies, resistance against the domination is extremely difficult without a vernacular component. Challenging or overcoming subjugation frequently depends on those expressions of disenfranchised life that articulate ideological oppositionality and the pleasures that are contained within—and extraneous to—acts of political resistance. The political is not always pleasurable; but the pleasurable, within the vernacular, is always potentially political. Within the terms of the vernacular, no minority or anticolonial struggle can be sustained if it does not contain in it a cultural element; an element, moreover, that has popular purchase. In the vernacular conception of politics, popular culture constitutes a singular practice. It represents that mode in which the political and the popular conjoin identificatory pleasure with ideological resistance.

In order for a black or marginalized intellectual (more so than for other figures) to be politically efficacious, the historical injunction is overdetermined: vernacularity is an absolute prerequisite. From W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, a study of black life in the Reconstruction

South, to Stuart Hall's writing on cultural studies, from C. L. R. James's treatise on cricket (*Beyond a Boundary*) to Angela Davis's theorization of the black woman's condition, black public thinkers of the twentieth century have been at their most incisive and effective when they adopt vernacularity as the dominant intellectual mode.¹

The vernacular, I argue in *What's My Name?*, is a distinct definition of—and a way of being—the intellectual. Deeply grounded in the ways in which the cultural shapes and reshapes the political impact of four black thinkers, Cyril Lionel Robert (C. L. R.) James, Stuart Hall, Muhammad Ali, and Bob Marley, this study reconsiders the post- and anticolonial figure as an intellectual. In setting Ali and Marley alongside James and Hall, I offer a conceptualization beyond the existing categorizations of the intellectual. This book rethinks the most fundamental tenet of what is accepted as “intellectual” by asking, Who is an intellectual? And, why? This study is an exploration of how these four different figures, from different parts and classes of the Caribbean and the United States, are understood as intellectuals; it refigures the public interventions they made (and are all, in their various ways, still making) and explicates how their various articulations, their different engagements with the dominant culture, register as intellectual labor.

In conceptualizing the vernacular intellectual, I draw on and develop, and then distinguish the category from, Antonio Gramsci's organic or traditional model. The Italian Marxist's construction of the intellectual (which turns on his famously egalitarian definition, “All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals”) provides the groundwork for the vernacular intellectual.² Gramsci's democratization of the role of public thinkers (gendered as it is)—“All men are intellectuals”—provides the basis for conceiving of the African-American boxer, the Trinidadian-born Marxist, the Jamaican-born New Lifter, and the Jamaican reggae star as political and cultural figures who perform, in their different societies, distinct “functions” as “intellectuals.” Gramsci's definition allows for (re)configuring a paradigm in which the articulations of a Marley (the various critiques of race, class, and ideology contained in his lyrics) and

a James (using cricket to inveigh against colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation) can both be understood as culturally based intellectual interventions; following Gramsci, it is possible to think of Ali and James simultaneously as antiracist black intellectuals, to imagine Hall and Marley as postcolonial figures who have as much resonance (more, until recently, in Hall's case) in the metropolis as they do in their peripheral Caribbean.³

However, if everyone can categorically be named an intellectual, it requires more than a reconceptualization of the “function” deemed intellectual to redefine the intellectual. *What's My Name?* rethinks what constitutes intellectual articulation and, in distinguishing itself from Gramsci's work, posits that what counts as intellectual labor extends beyond the framework of *The Prison Notebooks*—Gramsci's egalitarian terms in which he constructs intellectuals as those figures who represent more than the printed or spoken word of the educated middle classes, the bourgeoisie, or the formally trained working-class intellectual. The vernacular is a critique of the traditional/organic intellectual, at once a recognition of Gramsci's inadequacies and a model that exceeds by incorporating within its framework, without eliding difference, the work of scholars such as Hall and James and cultural figures such as Ali and Marley. Vernacularity allows for the thinking together of James and Marley, understanding how their intellectual influences derive from a similar locale: the recognition of popular culture as a primary site of politics. The popular is the social conjuncture that marks the complicated nexus between pleasure and resistance; the Marxist immersion in and critique of cricket intersects, overlaps, and coincides with a musician's socially conscious lyrics. In the terms of the vernacular, James's and Marley's oeuvres can be read as discrete articulations of the same sociopolitical process; James and Marley both speak, in their different registers and in their different historical moments, in the vernacular; they both grasp the popular as the most efficacious language and mode of resistance. However, as the later discussion of the crisis of Hall and James as organic intellectuals demonstrates, if for Marley the popular is the (only) political (modality), then for James the vernacular is the

acquired discourse; Marley is the organic vernacular, James represents the process by which the traditional organic intellectual conceives of, integrates, and writes himself into vernacularity.

In *The Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci's conception of the organic intellectual differs from that of the traditional intellectual in that they represent both distinct historical moments and modes of being a thinker; temporality and modality are equally important in distinguishing the traditional from the organic. The traditional intellectual belongs primarily to the ecclesiastical class (the landed aristocracy) while the organic intellectual represents new economic and political modes—the increasing bureaucratization of the state and its need to produce thinkers, a managerial class, who originate from within this new class and are therefore committed to this class, its interests, and its future within the state and its machinery. Every political constituency, as Gramsci points out in a discussion of the working class, can give birth to spokespersons or functionaries innate to it—every class has a cadre of thinkers dedicated to voicing its positions, organic to itself: “The working class, like the bourgeoisie before it, is capable of developing from within its ranks its own organic intellectuals, and the function of the political party, whether mass or vanguard, is that of channeling the activity of these organic intellectuals and providing a link between the class and certain sections of the traditional intelligentsia” (4). Organic intellectuals of early-twentieth-century capitalism represent, according to Gramsci, a new intellectual tradition in which class affiliation determines the role—or the function—of the well-schooled activist. Phrased in a Leninist vocabulary (“mass” or “vanguard”), it is clear from his meditation that Gramsci conceives of the intellectual as primarily a conventional political actor—as the working-class spokesperson who negotiates between his constituency of origin and the dominant classes.

While acknowledging the political impact and the import of the organic intellectual, *What's My Name?* offers a reading of the anti- and postcolonial figure that understands political intervention beyond the scope of the party, the trade union, and the “traditional bourgeoisie.” This book redefines what we understand an intellectual to be. However,

it is not only, though it is that too, an interrogation of the functions intellectuals perform; it rethinks *who* is an intellectual—as in, paradigmatically phrased, who an intellectual is. It is not simply a cataloging of who an intellectual is and what an intellectual does; it is a renovation of the category so that Ali, Jimi Hendrix, Grace Jones, Janis Joplin, and Martina Navratilova can, *inter alia*, be conceived as intellectuals, not simply as sportspersons or musicians.

Located at the intersection of cultural studies and postcolonial theory, and motivated by both, *What's My Name?* pivots on the importance of the “intellectualized popular”—the practices and the producers of that culture—to both these disciplines. The anti- and postcolonial struggle included more than simply the armed revolutionary movement; the independent Third World state's existence is inextricably linked to cultural campaigns for self-determination and respect for black and brown cultural practices denigrated, appropriated, or dismissed from official history by European colonial powers. Cultural studies, which is founded on the refutation of the high/low hierarchy and the reading of popular culture, can be said to take the engagement with these cultural practices seriously only if it acknowledges the variegated and layered intellectual process involved in producing the popular—and its multiple pleasures. To recast Gramsci, “All men and women who participate in the production of popular cultural practices are intellectuals”: the production of popular culture is a profoundly intellectual process. Marley, Eartha Kitt, Billie Holiday are particular kinds of intellectuals: they are iconic figures in large measure because they are producers, articulators, and disseminators of cultural knowledge; they are public figures who contribute and create new forms of knowledge; they think carefully about what they say (as much as any conventional intellectual), how they say it, why they are moved to say it; and they understand how their rhetorical interventions connect to their originary constituency. They recognize how, in Ellisonian terms, they are heard—or misheard or misrepresented—by the dominant culture.

In their turn, James and Hall are integrated into—and assume the status of—the vernacular through their grasp of the signality of the

cultural popular. By understanding cricket rather than formal political independence as *the* social practice that marks, and indeed precedes, West Indian sovereignty, James establishes himself as a vernacular intellectual. For this reason *Beyond a Boundary* together with *The Black Jacobins*, his treatise on the struggle for Haitian independence, stand as his major works: in *Beyond a Boundary* James demonstrates how the cultural is always political; how the cultural encodes, complicates, and sometimes anticipates the ideological; how culture is, in short, a series of inscribed political articulations; how culture can sometimes in and of itself constitute an instructive politics. In Hall's case, his several returnings to culture enable him to resituate himself within the vernacular—in his first turning to culture as a young member of the British New Left, in his later rethinking as one of the leading figures in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies where popular culture is first properly made an object of scholarly investigation, in his mediated turn to race through the popular (and denigrated, oppressive) experience of black migrants in Britain during the tail end of his time in Birmingham (the mid- to late 1970s), and in his 1980s work on identity politics and the postcolonial condition.

James and Hall share, in their vernacularity, a transgressiveness with Ali and Marley. Much like Ali transgresses established codes—quiescence, African-American acquiescence, the stereotype of the mute, rarely verbal, and, by extension, largely unthinking fighter—of his sport, so *Beyond a Boundary* marks James's reinterpretation of Marxist-Trotskyist intellectual production. In this work James privileges culture over class analysis and he suggests that social revolutions, while they may depend upon the laboring classes, can take political forms all too frequently ignored or dismissed (as “opiates of the masses”) by Marxist critics. In this text James is transgressing philosophically, marking not only a break within his own oeuvre but with the tradition in which he produced *The Black Jacobins* and his other main works.

Much like Marley creates reggae as musical genre to articulate the experience of the Trenchtown sufferer (most often cast as a Rastafarian subject), weaving together religion, politics, and culture, so Hall's

various intellectual modalities—especially from the Birmingham years on, though that is clearly grounded in the New Left years—speak of an intellectual transgression. Hall's work transforms itself into, is repeatedly drawn toward, the vernacular. The vernacular is crucial for Hall because existing intellectual and ideological formations cannot adequately accommodate the issues he is addressing, the questions he is posing, the landscapes he seeks to reimagine. Hall and James have to transgress intellectually (they have work against the dominant traditions in which they have operated and are committed to), they have to act “improperly” in relation to their disciplines by questioning its efficacy, they have to move outside, alongside, disjunctively in relation to their various disciplines in order to conduct their inquiries.⁴ The vernacular represents, for all these figures for this reason, a singular phenomenon: transgression as an intellectually generative mode. Through their various transgressions, through breaking with and giving offense to their traditions and the dominant public(s), and through setting themselves in opposition to various hegemonies, James, Marley, Hall, and Ali construct themselves as vernacular intellectuals. The vernacular is the transcription of the popular (subaltern) experience into political oppositionality.

What's My Name? is, in this way, a double-edged project. As much as Marley and Ali are thrown into sharp relief through the implicit comparison with Hall and James, considered disjunctively as I later argue, so this book also argues for the continuity and contiguity of vernacularity. Marley and Hall can at once stand alongside each other and their vernacularity can abut each other's. Their vernacularities share certain intellectual traits, such as a preoccupation with the popular, but also speaks from different locales, to different publics that seldom overlap, and in different vernacular registers. The vernacular is a shared intellectual paradigm for these figures, but it is a framework in which various differences cannot be overlooked or disregarded. The vernacular is a variegated, complex construct, and it requires a keen attentiveness to difference—the different kinds of work that James and Ali do, the different kinds of interventions Hall and Marley can make, considering where they speak from, to whom they speak, who hears them, and how they are

heard—if it is to function as an efficacious political category. Most important, however, in *What's My Name?*—the vernacular is not the exceptional. It constitutes the normative and most efficacious political modality for all of these figures.

The specific kind of historical, political, and ideological work that these figures, these vernacular intellectuals, perform, makes it necessary to think beyond the Gramscian paradigm. Gramsci insists that the distinction “between intellectuals and non-intellectuals” is simply a “reference” to the “immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort” (9). While James and Hall can easily be claimed by the “professional category,” Ali (especially) and Marley offer a conundrum that Gramsci does not address: they combine “intellectual elaboration” with their “muscular-nervous effort.” In fact, in Ali’s case especially—and more mutedly so for Marley—his physical actions, his skills as a boxer, are indistinguishable from his cerebral contemplations. Ali was, not to put too fine a point on it, a deeply intellectual fighter: a pugilist who thought strategically, assiduously, and craftily about his approach to boxing, about how not only to beat but to outwit his opponents. Ali’s “muscular-nervous effort”—his skill as a boxer—was an articulation of his “intellectual elaboration”—the ways in which he conceived himself not only as a fighter but as a black boxer who understood the ideological demands of his historical moment. Ali’s vernacular “intellectuality” is integral to, and indistinguishable from, his fistic armory, and, as importantly, his insistence on his right to rename himself. In Derrida’s “*Khora*,” the final essay in a three-part series of contemplations on naming, the name is conceived of as inscribing both social hierarchy and a rare physicality and geographical locality. “*Khora* means,” in Derrida’s terms, “place occupied by someone, country, inhabited place, marked place, rank, post, assigned position, territory or region.”⁵ Ali and Marley both rejected the “places” their different societies assigned them; they resisted the ways in which America and the Caribbean marked their bodies, their histories, and circumscribed their

sense(s) of themselves. Ali and Marley also, through their vernacular articulations, transcended—through cultural and ideological transgression—the restrictions placed upon their names. Moreover, they not only exceeded the “marked” (and marred) place in their own countries, but also achieved for (and through) their names a resonance that enabled them to speak at once oppositionally in and beyond their original sites of habitation. For Ali the significance attached to his name was also achieved through the process of renaming (the major transition that transformed Cassius Marcellus Clay into Muhammad Ali), of metaphorically occupying the same “place”—and other places—as a reconstructed, ideologically (religiously) different person. This was a process that Marley, who adopted Rastafarianism as a faith, also undertook, though his conversion was less dramatic than Ali’s. Marley expended a great deal of time and effort both on his guitar-playing and in producing lyrics and music that integrated his Rastafarian faith, popular appeal, his belief in racial equality, and his commitment to social transformation. Ali and Marley complicate Gramsci’s contemplations on the intellectuals by demonstrating how vernacular figures occupy a number of different places and by elucidating how cultural figures demand a reconsideration of even the most accommodating, expansive, and intellectually democratic of paradigms.

The ways in which Ali spoke (and, sometimes, still speaks now, as his post-September 11 public pronouncements demonstrate) and Marley sang (and continues to be heard) have long required, considering how they responded to the pressures of their (sometimes similar) historical conjunctures and their commitments to fashioning themselves as representatives of their (differently) oppressed constituencies, that they be conceptualized as more than simply cultural icons—articulate, highly public figures who belonged only to the world of sport or entertainment. The careers of Ali and Marley, however, have long exceeded such an understanding of their cultural and political work—or, their politicized cultural interventions—because they have affected the thinking, the actions, the public utterances of constituencies well beyond the packed arenas and stadiums of sports and popular music. What Marley’s lyrics

and Ali's witty rhymes speak to, for, and about constituencies and issues can only be grasped in its full complexity transgressively. Marley and Ali intervene(d) in and provoke(d) public debates far beyond the ordinary purview of the reggae star (or rock star, since the Jamaican was the first of his genre) or the athlete.

The chapters on Ali and Marley, and, to a lesser extent, the chapters on James and Hall, reexamine the public role and the public utterances of the intellectual, and the public locations—beyond the university, parliamentary debate, the anticolonial resistance movement, the editorial column, café society, the organized (and unorganized) political rally or protest—in which public figures function. *What's My Name?* posits previously unrecognized localities, the music concert, the press conference, the boxing ring, the popular music lyric, as intellectual sites by and for cultural figures who speak as vernacular intellectuals. Ali and Marley, and James and Hall, in their different ways, hold forth in the vernacular to a range of constituencies, some fluent in the vernacular, others acquiring it through the dissemination of the subaltern popular. Vernacular intellectuals are, as the process of bringing them to public prominence demonstrates, a complex representation of the voices from below or the margins speaking at once to, within, and against the hegemonic order.

Reading Disjunctively

What's My Name? maps the various trajectories that produce James, Hall, Marley, and Ali as intellectuals and enunciates—and illuminates—the disjunctures that mark their vernacularity. Recognizing that James and Hall are conventionally defined as intellectuals and that Ali and Marley are not, mapping the different paths by which these four figures come to construct themselves as intellectuals, this project utilizes disjuncture to interrogate the concept of the intellectual. *What's My Name?* explores and challenges notions of intellectual difference: How is James's status of intellectual distinct from Ali's, how is Hall's different from Marley's, or Ali's from Marley's, how is the conventional understanding of the intellectual reconfigured in the juxtaposition between Hall

and Marley? What happens to the category of the intellectual when it is interrupted, dislocated, and vernacularized? How is the icon of popular culture transformed when he or she is represented as an intellectual, of the vernacular or other variety? At the core of *What's My Name?* are the following questions: How expansive, incorporative, and complex is the category of the intellectual? How is the category of the intellectual reconfigured by vernacularity? How is this category complicated by contours of vernacularity since all vernacularities are clearly not the same? What happens in the process of vernacular cross-referencing, in which Hall and Marley are thought of in continuous relation to each other?

Ali and Marley represent, in this disjuncture, the grounded vernacular intellectual. These popular figures are thinkers, spokespersons, cultural articulators who emerge autochthonously from within the ranks of the popular classes, the working classes, or the underclasses within the minority or disenfranchised constituency. James and Hall, on the other hand, mark the more circuitous trajectory, the more protracted process, by which the conventionally trained—and institutionalized—intellectuals become vernacular thinkers.

Vernacularity marks that sociopolitical occasion when the conventional intellectual speaks less as a product of a hegemonic cultural-economic system than as a thinker capable of translating the disenfranchised experience of subjugation as an oppositional, ideologically recognizable, vernacularized discourse. Vernacularity represents the moment of a significant, palimpsestic transformation. Vernacularity signals the discursive turning away from the accepted, dominant intellectual modality and vocabulary and the adoption of a new positioning and idiomatic language. It also signals a turning toward, not in a nostalgic but in a considered and deliberate fashion, and (re)connection to an originary—but not necessary umbilical—community: it marks the initiation of that process when the conventionally trained intellectual is ideologically remade through culture—the culture of the subjugated, diasporic community, those cultural practices that signify an intersection between the dominant and the subjugated, those practices that,

while being marked as Other, have transformed both the periphery and the metropolis, that have affected relations between the (erstwhile) colonizer and the colonized, those practices that have reconstituted the diasporized constituencies and the metropolis as a whole.

The vernacular intellectual is distinguished from the Gramscian organic by a situatedness within the popular, frequently racialized experience of disempowered constituencies. While the organic is rooted in communities, the vernacular articulates an equivocal relationship to hegemony, a complex negotiation with the dominant group that is characterized by a self-conscious difference and defiance. The vernacular is defined by its immersion in the language of the popular, the particularities, idiosyncrasies, and distinctness of vernacular speech; the vernacular is marked by its ability to speak popular resistance and popular culture to power. Here vernacular is discrete from the organic, which is intensely preoccupied with disarticulating existing formations of power without attending to how power is located within and articulated through the popular. Vernacular intellectuals, of the grounded (Marley) or “protracted” (James) mien, are those figures who understand, utilize, and deploy vernacularity as a discourse within and against the dominant sphere—though not always from the same vantage point.

In considering how the vernacular functions, firmly rooted in race and the popular as it is here, it is important to recognize that issues such as gender and sexual orientation add further complexity, nuance, limitations, and possibilities to the model of the postcolonial vernacular intellectual. Historically, like most other modes of struggle and recorded in works that range from sub-Saharan fictions to sub-(Asian) continental histories, resistance to colonialism was a series of profoundly misogynistic practices. Anticolonial forces, as much as independent postcolonial societies, denied women access to public spheres, curtailing their capacity to give voice to their particular vernacularity. Female athletes such as Althea Gibson, the openly gay Navratilova, or the Williams sisters (women who have certainly not been afraid to either challenge accepted images of tennis players or raise the issue of racism as it continues to obtain in the still predominantly lily-white world of tennis)

had—and have—to engage a great deal more than racial discrimination. These women have had to confront the ways in which the sport’s public and the media are so indelibly shaped by patriarchy, the cultural disenfranchisement of women, and heteronormativity. The same applies to black female artists such as Aretha Franklin and Eartha Kitt who had and have to work within paradigms that are markedly different from those of their male counterparts.

The largely male-dominated world of sport and popular music reveals how embedded the vernacular is in suppressing its own “female unconscious,” how the subaltern is in part constituted by its own oppressive treatment of women and gays as underclasses, how it is marked by its own silences. The vernacular’s history is, as regards the struggles of women or gays and lesbians, marked by incompletions. The vernacular provides only a partial accounting of resistance, a construction of the intellectual that is at once deeply oppositional and radical and yet bound by the patriarchal constraints of its historical modality. Ali and Marley speak an incendiary but deficient vernacular truth to power, offering a postcolonial narrative that is less inadequate—though it is that too—than marked by historical partiality. Oppositional figures such as Janis Joplin or the androgynous Grace Jones (who complicates gender identity in a very distinct way) speak from decidedly different, and significantly less empowered, public locales. Sometimes, more disturbingly, they are not allowed to speak at all. Even when these women do secure public voice, they are, consequently, sometimes heard—if and when they are listened to—on the lowest of the Ellisonian frequencies, rendering them invisible women. For women the vernacular, even as it seeks to create new possibilities for subaltern articulation, serves as a reminder of how female alienation by the patriarchal/racist complex impacts and manifests itself in the vernacular.

The critical reception afforded the Czech-born Navratilova demonstrates how inveterately heteronormative our various popular cultures remain—despite the struggles and gains around the politics of identity—and how difficult it is for the lesbian or gay sportsperson to craft her- or himself as a vernacular figure. Although Navratilova’s sexual orientation

is now largely accepted by the sport's media and its public, when she first revealed her homosexuality she met with considerable opposition—the women's tennis tour is still (much like women's golf), from time to time, branded as a hotbed of sport's lesbianism. Deeply eroticized as the vernacular is, it is always a pronouncedly heterosexual desire—regardless of whether or not it is xenotropic. In delineating the vernacular, the specificities, peculiarities, and effects of gender and sexual orientation have to be closely attended to if this conception of intellectuals is to have any efficacy.

Even as it proposes a categorical difference, the vernacular requires critical vigilance: an awareness of Other differences that have to be accounted for, other social forces that impact the construction and identity of the intellectual. How does the sexual ambiguity of Grace Jones or Prince affect the paradigm of the vernacular? How would a gay football player or baseball player reconfigure the category? Would Marley signify differently as a vernacular intellectual if he were bisexual? I do not take up these interrogations in *What's My Name?* but they are inquiries that have great salience for the conception of other popular figures as vernacular intellectuals.

The issue of difference, however, does resonate in this project because, as the discussions of the grounded and “achieved” vernacular will show, vernacularity can be derived from remarkably variegated locales, from unexpected histories and contradictory relationships to hegemony. The vernacular is a mobile and flexible experience, accommodating of different trajectories, and is a theoretically supple category: it derives from a keen understanding of and engagement with the popular, but it is—like the popular cultural producers and cultural theorists critiqued in this book—neither narrow nor prescriptive in its conception. The four figures under study here are four versions of the postcolonial intellectual. *What's My Name?* charts how they become vernacular in their own way. The project recognizes that the vernacular is a particularized experience that has specific purchase in various sites, and the intellectual is shaped by the workings of that (local) context.

By delineating the advantages and limitations of that “traditional” construction and the ways in which political conjunctures intervene to compel a rethinking of their position, the chapters on James and Hall both demonstrate how historical—and epistemological—crises produce the recasting of the cosmopolitan, metropolitan, diasporic, and organic intellectual into a vernacular mold. The key issue in these chapters is transition: How does the organic intellectual become a vernacular figure? What marks the point of transition? What accounts for the transformation? How does the intellectual's work change in the process? In the Ali chapter, from which the project takes its title, and the Marley one, the great(est) boxer and the talismanic “founder” of reggae music are defined as “organically,” if not prototypically, vernacular intellectuals. Through their various articulations, interventions into the national and global public sphere, from tiny Jamaica to postcolonial Africa, from resisting the Vietnam draft to paying (problematic) obeisance to Haile Selassie, Ali and Marley are read as figures who illuminate both the unusual possibilities for and the potential limitations inherent in being a vernacular intellectual.

The Language of Vernacularity

Vernacularity, though it emerges from below, from the periphery or the underclasses, is considerably more than a language of subalterneity. It is not only a language in itself, but a form public discourse sure of itself—sometimes inexplicably so. It is articulate and confident in its cadences, speech patterns, and intonations. Vernacularity is the language of the Other that, while conscious of its difference and Otherness, stands as a form of singular intervention. In some instances—such as Muhammad Ali's 1960s and 1970s press conferences, several Marley concerts, or contemporary hip-hop music—vernacularity conducts itself as the only modality of intervention into the dominant public sphere (which all too frequently signifies the white public sphere). Frequently, vernacularity is the mode of expression that has to bear the burden of overrepresentation: it is, in a disproportionately high number of instances, presumed to

be the form of minority public expression that speaks for disenfranchised constituencies. Too many vernacular pronouncements are made to bear an undue weight, too many gestures are read as loaded, overdetermined with value (or the absence of value and “civilization”) and valences possibly discordant with it.

The vernacular is, for this reason, susceptible to dilution, elision, misrepresentation, and, not least of all, cooptation by a dominant discourse. Marley found himself, despite his best efforts at ideological neutrality, at the center of the political debate in Jamaica, so much so that there was an attempt on his life just hours before he was due to play a peace concert in Kingston in 1976. Ali, icon of black self-determination and opposition to racism and colonialism, seriously considered fighting in apartheid South Africa. Hall, chief ideological critic of Thatcherism, despite his critiques of Tony Blair’s government, has been linked—however fairly or unfairly—to New Labour’s “Third Way” policy. (Impatient with the British Labour Party’s repeated electoral losses, Blair and his allies fashioned the ideology of the Third Way. It is a program designed to modernize Labour, make it electable, loosen the grip—and the undemocratic structures—the trade unions had on the party and, most importantly, to find a middle ground, the third way, between democratic socialism—to which the party had historically been committed—and free-market capitalism.)⁶ The vernacular, because it coexists so dialectically and symbiotically with the dominant culture, is ideologically vulnerable because the various state apparatuses understand how to appropriate, deploy (as a counterradical strategy), and transform radical oppositionality into a marketable commodity. From Ali’s attempt, at the behest of the U.S. government, to convince African countries not to boycott the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal (in protest against the New Zealand rugby tour to South Africa) to U2 front man Bono’s efforts on his 2002 tour of the continent with former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Paul O’Neill to rethink the debt policy that impoverishes African nations, vernacular figures have always found themselves both attracted to the trappings of state power and unexpectedly impotent in the face of it. The cooptation by the state confers, in a

problematic if alluring way, a kind of social capital, authority, and location that vernacularity—a mode of intellectuality girded by oppositionality—cannot.

However, if the vernacular is vulnerable to the lures of the right, it is no less so in the face of left enticements and allegiances. Marley (through his refusal to critique Haile Selassie’s peculiar brand of religious despotism), Ali (through his inability to recognize the failures of the Nation of Islam), and James (through his inability to recognize the postcolonial crises that Toussaint L’Ouverture’s ascension in Haiti enunciates) demonstrate how the vernacular can be blind to corruption, violences, and exploitative workings of the anticolonial or the antihegemonic.⁷

Vernacularity is the discourse that encodes larger economic and political disenfranchisements. Overburdened by structural lack (historic absence of material resources and access to capital), vernacular speech is politicized as much by its content, though much of that may be superimposed, as by the absence of formal political channels of redress or representation. It is the minority discourse that stands in both for and as something else, for the other modes of resistances or oppositionalities that either cannot be voiced or have been drowned out; or, it takes the place of those protest votes that either cannot be cast or simply have no consequence or purchase in the dominant political sphere.

As delivered at a press conference by Ali, in Marley’s reggae music, or in James’s recounting of the peculiar vocabulary that attends cricket in colonial Trinidad, *vernacularism* is a “word, idiom, or mode of expression” that refuses to be modulated, intimidated, or silenced by the machinations of the public sphere.⁸ At the very worst, it simultaneously accommodates itself to and undermines hegemony. Within this context the vernacular cannot be reduced to etymology, a series or history of speech patterns indigenous to a “country or district.” It functions in this instance as a mode of linguistic expression, a repertoire of representation, a politics of being, particular to a racialized, ideologically marginalized constituency. The vernacular, as in the black or postcolonial vernacular, is not a marker of national or regional identity. It is

simultaneously a sign of difference and disenfranchisement. In colonial and postcolonial societies, vernacular speech belongs to the colonized or the ghettoized communities of the metropolis. The vernacular is counterposed to (and is less valued than) the formal—or “proper”—speech of the colonizers or the metropolitanized discourse of the dominant society.

In the same way that the African-American blues was once unrecognized by America’s Anglophone establishment, or the poetry of the Negritude movement was dismissed by the Francophone establishment, the vernacular, characterized by its informality, its nontraditional grammatical structures, its discursive hybridity, and its proclivity for drawing on and incorporating other cultural formations, even other languages, is also dismissed. The work of blues artists such as Robert Johnson or *Presence Africaine* authors such as Aimé Césaire or the poet-philosopher-statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor was at once the articulation of linguistic impurity and cultural innovation. That hybridity is so closely related to the overdetermined response the vernacular provokes signals a major conjuncture. The vernacular marks that intersection where the Other is both denigrated and turned into the object of xenotropic desire, the black body or history that is ridiculed or violence against and the culture that is mimicked by the dominant society. Although xenotopia frequently produces immediate mimicry, it is also a temporally uneven process, divided between what we might superficially conceive of as “culture” and “politics.” While the desire to adopt black modes of representation such as street couture or musical styles may be instant, there was and is generally a greater reluctance to identify with the ideological girdings of the culture. A post-1970s Ali (when he stumped for Ronald Reagan, then the California governor who had little more than a decade earlier sworn that “no draft dodger will fight in my state”) has increasingly been adopted as a sanitized American icon, stripped of his radical past and the oppositionality it signaled. Hip-hop may enjoy widespread currency among white youth, but the black anger against structural disenfranchisement that sustains the music is all too frequently ignored.

The vernacular is, for this reason, the complex object that inspires hegemonic imitation and yet is despised—feared, even—because it is the incarnation and the articulation of that which is deemed culturally and economically lesser, the speech of the working class or the ethnic minority, the discourse of the racial subject. However, even when it is dismissed, the vernacular can still, in some if not all instances, stand as the enunciation of a threatening, angry resistance, a determination to speak within and against the dominant group with the hint of Fanonian violence. And, in the case of anticolonial revolutions—as in Cuba or Haiti or Kenya or Mozambique—the circumscription of the vernacular contains its own momentous capacity for violent action. When the subaltern subject is not allowed to speak in its own terms, its own discourse, its history, culture, or traditions, when it is alienated from its vernacularity, it is eminently capable of transcribing suppression into a violence aimed at the destruction of its oppressors. While it functions mainly at the level of the linguistic, the vernacular is—to invoke V. N. Volosinov’s term—multiaccentual: it can, under extreme conditions or when particular alliances are made or certain modes dominate, articulate itself in more than one (oppositional) register, in more than one way.

Vernacularity is always, however, more than the language and mode of self-representation for the disenfranchised or dispossessed, the discourse that is almost invariably, despite or because of itself, imprinted with the mark of the politically subjugated: the immigrant, the working class, the black or ethnic community. Vernacularity has a contradictory function in that it is at once the marker of disjuncture, the form of speech that separates rich from poor, dominant from dominated, the speech that distinguishes black self-representation from its white counterpart, and an ironic conjoining.

Command of and the inhabiting of the vernacular, living it as a raced or classed subject, rather than mere mimicry or performance, identify it as a paradoxical sign of authenticity. The vernacular reassures the hegemonic group of their difference, their discursive, locational separation (that place where they stand, almost literally), and their linguistic superiority to—the command of, historic attachment and association

with “proper” discourse, the formal expression of a particular language—that of the variously raced, gendered, and ethnicized underclass. Because of this, however, authenticity reveals itself as a dependent gesture, announcing a dialectical relationship between the vernacular and the formal. The authentic signifies difference rather than singularity (its authority derives from what it is not, the vernacular); it also indicates a reliance upon externality—that which is outside of and different from it—rather than essentiality—the pure, nonderivative epistemological being. The authentic can only enunciate itself as a formal discourse dialectically: in contradistinction to the informality and impurity of the vernacular, that to which it implicitly counterposes itself.

The Crisis of Vernacularity

For black intellectuals such as James and Hall, the engagement with vernacularity not only marks the coming to and deployment of popular consciousness, but also signals a (or sometimes *the*) major transformation in their work. It constitutes the moving away from one mode of intellectual production in the direction of another. Vernacularization entails the relinquishing of certain privileges, guarantees of access, academic status, and credibility in order to assume a decidedly different set of historical responsibilities. Vernacularization is never a historical inevitability; it is, rather, the direct consequence of a moment of intellectual crisis. It is that conjuncture when black figures, recognized by the dominant culture as conventionally trained and active intellectuals, confront in their work an incommensurability between their occupation in the academy (or the arts world) and their experience as minority spokespersons, a tension between the kind of work they are producing and the consequence it is having (or, failing to have) in the world. The crisis is fueled not by a fear of being silenced, but the prospect of a dual insignificance: excessive or extraordinarily successful interpellation, on the one hand, and a complete severing of the links between the black intellectual and his or her originary community, on the other hand.

The crisis of (re-)affiliation is the consequence of a recognition of limits: the knowledge that, after decades of immersion in Marxist and

Trotskyist activism, James realized that he had to adopt another mode in order for him to make substantive links with the Caribbean working classes to whom he had committed himself ideologically. Cricket, and the richly allusive way in which the sport is deployed in *Beyond a Boundary*, becomes the cultural practice that enables James to resolve his intellectual crisis through vernacularity. For Hall that moment has a much longer history, originating with his very arrival in England as a Rhodes scholar who was soon involved in the New Left movement. Hall’s crisis turns on that instance when the question of racial identity and identification (both who he was and whom he primarily aligned himself with) becomes too urgent, too pressing to allow him to function simply as a New Left thinker or a cultural studies critic.

If Ali’s and Marley’s vernacularity emerges from within, marking an organic or essentialist vernacularity, James’s and Hall’s is the product of history—a response to the pressures, the changing conditions, the movement of social forces from without that compels a new kind of interpellation. Both experiences are salient as processes, however, marking the distinct—but connected—ways in which vernacularity manifests itself in the hegemonic sphere. The issue, then, is not whether vernacularity articulates itself, but from which locale and in response to what situation the vernacular(-ized) intellectual speaks. In some ways it matters less which minority public figure is considered a vernacular intellectual. What is more important is how and why they come to constitute themselves as vernacular spokespersons. However, Ali’s experience of “internal exile” and Marley’s of exile produced their own modalities of crisis for these vernacular intellectuals. Both crises were precipitated by their (different) encounters with the neoimperialist and newly postcolonial state. Ali, banned from boxing because of his refusal to be drafted into the Vietnam War, and Marley, driven from Jamaica because of internecine political violence in Trenchtown and other such ghettos, each responded very differently to the confrontation with crisis. Ali remained, in part because his skills as political prognosticator verbally anticipated (and scripted) the repressive workings of the state, largely unchanged: his politics remained consistent (and idiosyncratically uneven)

in its oppositionality. But for Marley, the Jamaican crisis and its concomitant violence as well as his encounter with African postcoloniality were ideologically productive. It led to a critical reevaluation of his conception of Babylon, Zion, and the functioning of the postcolonial state.

The Vernacular Intellectual

The vernacular intellectual, unlike the traditional and organic intellectual, is in no way connected to organized political structures. Not the state, not the revolutionary party, not the elite of café society. These figures emerge, quite literally, out of the vernacular experience, well versed in the discourse of popular oppositionality but outside of its formal articulations. Vernacular intellectuals craft a unique public space from which to speak as they address the issues of the day that directly affect their community. In his attempt to redefine the dominant conception of intellectuals and engender a rethinking of the role performed by institutionally nonaccredited public figures, Jorge Castañeda argues for a reconsideration of these figures: “Through their writings, speeches, and other activities systematically substituted for innumerable institutions and social actors.” Valid as Castañeda’s notion of supplementarity may be, to read vernacular intellectuals as “substitutes” is to detract from the extent to which they act of their own volition. Figures such as Ali and Marley are public figures because of their connection to the vernacular, because their “speeches,” lyrics, and social intervention echo, reinscribe, and innovate within the hegemonic discourse. Vernacular intellectuals speak differently, self-consciously so, but this does not mean that they fail to grasp the importance of the political concern voiced by mainstream intellectuals; they know how to translate the interests of the populace into, and as, metaphors of the popular. Vernacular intellectuals understand that the dominant discourse is not tone deaf, that it can hear protests—and the resistances encoded therein—in many timbres. The popular is not the evacuation or the dilution of the political; it is simply its vernacular reinscription: it is speaking, cognizant of its various susceptibilities, in a different way, for and from different constituencies.

Figures such as Ali and Marley are grounded in the vernacular, are of the vernacular community, speak for the vernacular, in the vernacular, and yet they stand slightly removed from the experience: in it, of it, but not consumed or restricted by it, aware of how to make the transcription from subaltern to dominant sphere, always ready to oppose or transgress, even as they are vulnerable to the various cooptations at work. Michael Hanchard’s description of black public figures is apropos for the kind of function vernacular intellectuals perform. These spokespersons stand, in Hanchard’s terms, for a community “whose commentary and insights exceed the boundary of their celebrity. With neither political offices nor constituencies to hold them responsible, they use their highly visible public positions within the academy, arts, and letters to engage in public debate.”⁹ Vernacular intellectuals are oppositional public figures who use the cultural platforms and spaces available to them, but not ordinarily accessible to their disenfranchised communities, to represent and speak in the name of their communities. Celebrity status, acquired in the “nonpolitical” realm, empowers minority athletes to pronounce on an unexpected range of subjects in the civic domain; they are able to produce articulations for a public that far exceeds their narrow professional base—the arts or the academy or the sports arena. Ideologically mobile, these figures move back and forth between the popular and the political realms. These icons can be, simultaneously, cultural producers or political activists, speaking metonymically for themselves or their constituency—that body of subjects deliberately excluded from the formal public debate.

The difficulty in acquiring political office, for this very reason, never means that disenfranchised communities do not participate in public discourses; it simply means that their articulations are far more likely to emerge from informal, and frequently unacknowledged, public locales—and personages. As Hanchard reminds us, “The most significant figures within U.S. African-American communities—Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, even Booker T. Washington—have never held elected public office.”¹⁰ These unelected office bearers were nominated through popular acclaim,

determined largely by the commensurability between the elevated status of these figures and the access that status gives them to public platforms.

These figures participate in public debates not only as barely recognized spokespersons, but in a vocabulary unaccredited and often disparaged by ruling blocs—of both hegemonic and subjugated constituencies. The vernacular intellectual is constituted, as it were, by vernacular articulation. By introducing and strategically deploying vernacular speech patterns, idioms, and metaphors, iconic figures such as Ali and Marley alter, quite literally, the very language of the dominant discourse. Vernacular intellectuals intervene in the public debate about issues relevant for them and their community in a language inscribed with the history of their disenfranchisement and subjugation.

However, much as vernacular intellectuals speak for or in the name of their constituencies, so their very lack of “public office” represents a particular kind of alienation from and unaccountability to the minority constituency. More than any other American figure, Ali is symptomatic of the vernacular intellectual. Paraded now only as a figure of quiescence, a desire for American society to suture post-*ipso facto* the intense divisions of the 1960s and 1970s—to write out the atrocities, the defeat and internal violence produced by Vietnam, the multiple assassinations that rocked the nation’s moral core; to sanitize or sentimentalize the counterculture; to forget the corruption of Nixon—Ali redefined the scope and possibilities for black figures transgressing and even invalidating the boundaries of the nation’s public sphere.

Much like Marley’s reggae would transform many forms of popular music (punk, rock, nascent rap) and black identity and historical imagination from Kingston to Kansas, from London to Lilongwe, Malawi, in the late 1970s, so Ali’s vernacularity reconceptualized the 1960s understanding of politics and the actors who make, shape, disrupt, and impact it. Through their ability to pronounce, with an inimitable fluency and innovativeness, on boxing, culture, politics, and ideology, Ali and Marley were able to intervene in matters of public policy, give rare voice to black self-representation in the United States, the Caribbean, and diasporic communities in Europe, and align themselves ideologically with the

newly postcolonial world in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Ali may be the first representative of the vernacular cosmopolitan—the African-American icon who translated the United States into and for newly independent peoples in Africa and Asia, the American who understood how to connect Kentucky to Kinshasa, Chicago to Kuala Lumpur. Marley was, arguably, the heir to that throne. What Ali and Marley demonstrate is the paradox of the vernacular: derived from and produced by the (American and Caribbean) local, the ideological content, style, and self-representation of the vernacular shows itself to be eminently translatable, globally applicable, politically usable in contexts well beyond its originary base.

The vernacular is ideologically mobile, responsive to crises, adaptable to its situation, able to translate and situate itself in nonnative locales; because of the workings of history and the reduction of geographical distance through cultural proximity, the vernacular has global purchase. The vernacular is situated but not physically—which is to say, geographically—restricted. The vernacular can be exported; or, it can make common cause with other vernaculars. The postcolonial condition constitutes its own global vernacular. It is no accident that Ali, more than Marley, was (at first) more readily accepted by the Third World and the black diaspora than he was by mainstream America. Similarly, Marley produced his most cogent, searing, but intensely lyrical critiques of the Jamaican and postcolonial state not from within Kingston, but only after his *de facto* exile after the 1976 attempt on his life at the (in)famous “peace” concert. Both Marley and Ali grasped the violence, linguistic and physical, that girds the vernacular although that recognition never inhibited their capacity to produce themselves as singular intellectual figures. The postcolonial, the work of James, Ali, Marley, and Hall suggests, can be understood in its full complexity only through the vernacular.