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**The Rhetoric of Prayer:  
Dutty Boukman, the Discourse of “Freedom from Below,” and the  
Politics of God**

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In the night of August 22, 1791, which initiated the Haitian Revolution, Dutty Boukman, a slave and religious leader gathered a gang of slaves and uttered one of the most important prayers in the Black Atlantic religious thought.<sup>1</sup> The prayer embodies the historical tyranny of oppression and suffering, and the collective cry for justice, freedom, and human dignity of the

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent studies on the Haitian Revolution include the following: Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004); David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Carol E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from below* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

enslaved Africans at Saint-Domingue. In my examination of this important text, I situate the prayer of Boukman in the tradition of Black theology of resistance and freedom. Toward this goal, I demonstrate some points of reference including ideological connections and parallels between James Cone and Dutty Boukman. I then reread James Cone's "God of the Oppressed" thesis in the light of Boukman's historical invocation. I consider particularly the common themes of liberty, freedom, resistance, and vindication embedded in these two texts. I contend that, if Boukman is not the first who speaks of a black God, he is certainly among the earliest to express this view and the earliest to articulate the notion of a Black theology of emancipation. I am very keen in the manner which the enslaved Africans theorized freedom and conceptualized the meaning of "freedom from below" as well as the various rhetorical strategies used in the prayer. Therefore, it is my goal to demonstrate these experiences and constructions through a creative literary and theological reading of the text.

I also argue that Boukman's articulation of a black theology of liberation is anti-colonial and counters white supremacist theories of race and God. Boukmanian theology of freedom refutes the racial colonization of religion and God. Particularly, his theological imagination seeks to accomplish two things: (1) the deconstruction of the colonial theology of the master and (2) the [re-] construction of a creative theological voice that calls explicitly for the emancipation of enslaved blacks in the island. Finally, I propose that the prayer of Boukman envisioned a new theological conversation in forms of divine vindication and collective solidarity across the Black Atlantic.

The importance of this essay is twofold. First, it establishes the role and significance of religion at the earliest stage of the Haitian Revolution; second, it rejects the idea that enslaved Africans in the Saint-Dominguan territory had no natural drive for freedom.<sup>2</sup> Complementarily, this essay argues for another equally compelling tradition to what is known today as “Black Liberation Theology,” rooted in the Haitian revolutionary experience and world. In other words, in seeking to present a Haitian genealogy of theology of liberation, I am reconfiguring this particular theological persuasion and discourse. My hope is that the reader will appreciate Haiti’s contribution to critical theory of liberation theology as well as our contemporary struggle to be free from all kinds of oppression or injustice.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, David Geggus states that slaves’ notions about freedom were all ambiguous, and “conditioned by their perception of what was possible or probable” *Slavery, War, and Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 32. Yves Debbasch, Gabriel Debien, and Francois Girod, in varying degrees, implausibly demonstrate that the urge for freedom was not strong among Saint-Dominguan slaves, but counted minimally to the Haitian independence. For further details, see Yvan Debbasch, “Le marronnage. Essai sur la désertion de l’esclave antillais,” *L’Année sociologique* 3 (1963-1962), 1-112, 117-195; Gabriel Debien, *Les esclaves aux Antilles françaises, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Basse-Terre : Société d’histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1974); François Girod, *La vie quotidienne de la société créole: Saint-Domingue au XVIIe siècle* (Paris : Hachette, 1972) ; Carolyn Fick, *The Making Haiti: Saint Domingue Revolution From Below* (Knoxville : University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 5-7. I reject this particular position held by these historians; I argue that the slaves at Saint-Domingue had a natural love for liberty, and the desire for independence was there from the beginning. I contend further that the resolution to general liberty and independence were one singular commitment for the slaves. These twin and inseparable ideas did not develop in the later phase of the revolution, as many historians have unconvincingly tried to prove. My perspective is that independence was already an early goal that came to fruition in the unfolding events of the revolution. However, it was conditioned by a range of contingent circumstances and events in which slaves were obliged to fight for freedom, which translated into a matter of practical reality. I address the ideas of liberty and independence in two forthcoming articles: “Toussaint Louverture and Fragments of Rhetorical Freedom,” and “The Slaves’ Letter: Revolutionary Rhetoric of Freedom at Saint-Domingue.”

## The Rhetoric of Prayer

The Bois-Caïman (Alligator Woods) experience was both a religious and political event which sought the liberation of an enslaved community through a functional speech that can be called a rhetoric of resistance. The protest orator embodies the accompanying communal plight and existential conditions of the masses in chains and in quest for emancipation. Acutely interactive with the anti-colonialist imperative and anti-slavery sentiment of human destiny, the maroon and religious leader Boukman lifts his head up to the sky and prays militantly:

*Bon Dié qui fai soleil qui clairé nou en haut ;  
Qui soulevé la mer, qui fait gronder l'orage ;  
Bon Dié, zottes tendé, caché nan youn nuage ;  
La li gadé nou, li ouè tout ça blan fait ;  
Bon Dié blan mandé crime, et pa nous vlé bienfait ;  
Mais Dié la qui si bon ordonné nous veanceance ;  
Li va conduit bra ou, ba nou assistance ;  
Jeté pòtrait Dié blan qui soif dlo nan zies ;  
Couté la liberté qui parlé nan cœur nou tous.<sup>3</sup>*

[God who makes the sun which gives us light,  
Who rouses the waves and makes the storm,  
Though hidden in the clouds, he watches us.  
He sees all that the whites are doing.  
The God of the whites orders crime,  
But our God calls upon us to do good works.  
Our God who is good to us orders us to avenge our wrongs.  
He will direct our arms and aid us.  
Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites  
Who has so often caused us to weep,  
And listen to the voice of liberty,  
Which speaks in the hearts of us all.]<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Michel Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (London: MacMillan Press LTD, 1989), 63. The Creole word *Bon Dié* can be rendered as God or good God in English.

<sup>4</sup> My translation from the Creole text. The first Creole text was first transcribed by Haitian writer Herard Dumesle and later adopted by historian Herard Dumesle in 1824, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayiti, ou revelations des lieux et des monuments*, 1824). There are various versions of the prayer in Creole but the underpinning ideas remain the same. In fact, there are just minor variations in different readings.

Boukman's invocation registers the collective desire for justice, and the urgency for human liberation. Most importantly, it symbolizes the determination of the oppressed community to fight together for their total liberation. As it is evident, the call was an exhortation to fight for deliverance. What was at stake was not merely Black freedom but the imperative vindication of the dignity of man against the inhuman bondage of slavery that masks human potential. Embedded in the text is the language of freedom that is represented as both a quest and an ideal. As a quest, it must be negotiated through the general will of the slave community. Freedom as an ideal questionably means the philosophical underpinnings of a shared vision that renounces slavery altogether and redresses universal justice. The advent of the Bois-Caiman gathering meant for the slaves the prospect to "forge a new existence based on self-defined goals and aspirations."<sup>5</sup> It also presages the rising expectations of the entire slave population to cast off the shackles of colonialism and claim their inalienable rights as equal members of the human race. The words of Boukman must have caused a profound change of consciousness on the collective subalterns, insofar as they acted swiftly and directly effecting considerably economic lost in the colony. These were the very words of life that stimulated the revolution, incarnated in a simple freedom prayer.

Born in the island Jamaica, Dutty Boukman was sold to an English slaver who brought him to Saint-Domingue. The maroon and religious leader entered the epic of the Haitian history the night he summoned, in a nocturnal ceremony, a group of slave coachmen to plan their liberty.

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<sup>5</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, "The French Revolution in Saint Domingue: A Triumph or a Failure?" in David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus (eds.), *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 60.

Boukman served previously as a slave driver, then a coachman in the plantation of Clement, in the Northern region of the island. He was known as a charismatic leader and had an incredible influence on the various work communal gangs in the plantations.<sup>6</sup> Not only was he deeply involved in the unfolding political events in Saint-Domingue, he was a central figure in inaugurating the general revolt. Like Makandal his forerunner, he was able to gain the trust of many slave communities and established a network of slave followers in *Le Cap-Français*, a major city in Northern Haiti. After judicious planning, the insurgent leader and his followers and other revolutionaries teamed up to challenge the French colonial rule in a battle for independence. On the night of August 14, 1791, the high priest Boukman spoke these influential words:

The God of the white man inspires him with crime, But our God calls upon us to do good works. Our God who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the God of the whites who has so often caused us to weep and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of us all.<sup>7</sup>

At the hearing of the oration, the assembled slaves were moved by the dazzling power of his words, and immediately “took an oath of secrecy and revenge.”<sup>8</sup> And the freedom journey began; the masses joined the Haitian Revolution.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Fouchard, *The Haitian Maroons: Liberty or Death* (New York: Edward W. Blyden Press, 1972), 339-340.

<sup>7</sup> Dubois, *Avengers*, 100.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ott, *The Haitian Revolution*, 48.

Within a week of this politico-religious gathering, on August 22, the revolutionaries went forth to put slavery behind and all the tears it had caused them. The terrorized and controlled mechanisms of the peculiar institution were also left behind. In the early stage of the revolt, more than 2,000 insurgents went from one plantation to another murdering their oppressors, setting fire in their houses and in the cane fields. The damage was horrendous, as many historians register. It is observed that the slaves destroyed seven parishes and demolished 184 sugar plantations and 1,200 coffee plantations in the northern plain only.<sup>10</sup> The Haitian novelist, Stephen Alexis, poetically recaptures the revolutionary moment: “The Negroes, poorly armed, were upheld by a spirit which made them formidable enemies...Singing as they did so: ‘Gunpowder is but water! Ping! Pindang! Canon is but bamboo! Ping! Pindang!’”<sup>11</sup> The Boukmanian incident looked forward to a new era of the reconstitution of a new autonomous consciousness, a matter of practical freedom for the enslaved people. This direct mobilization of the people launched a new era of popular self-determination and the assertion of the unconditional universal rights of man. It was all because of one drastic cry of freedom: “Listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all,” which Boukman spoke a week before.

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive figure and detailed description of the August uprisings, see Fick, 105-106, 301; Dubois, 90-114; Ott, 47-64.

<sup>11</sup> *The Black Liberator: The Life of Toussaint Louverture* (Oxford: Ernest Benn, 1949), 28.



FIGURE 1. Ulrick-Jean-Pierre “Painting entitled Bois Caiman 1,” (*Revolution of Saint-Domingue, Haiti, August 14, 1791*), 1979. Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in. From Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*.

The actuality of the event and the authentic content of the speech have, nevertheless, been contested by scholars.<sup>12</sup> Prominent French scholar, a leading voice in Haitian literature, Leon-Francois Hoffmann, in a well-documented article “Un Mythe national: La cérémonie du Bois-Caïman (1993), advances a compelling thesis that the Bois-Caiman event never took place. Hoffman posits the idea that the event is an elaborated historical fiction and cannot be sustained reliably on plausible historical grounds. His marked skepticism is best illustrated in this phrase: “The Bois Caiman ceremony leads to the almost certain conclusion that we are dealing here not with a historical event but with a legend, whose origins can be traced to the malevolent

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<sup>12</sup> The text was first mentioned by the colonist Antoine Damas in *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* published in 1814. Dalmas served as surgeon in the Gallifet plantation on the northern plain. After escaping the revolt, he took refuge in the United States.

imagination of a French planter” whom he names: Antoine Delma.<sup>13</sup> Hoffman is correct in what he affirms but wrong in what he denies. British historian David P. Geggus, who should be dubbed the contemporary Dean of Haitian revolutionary studies, often belittles the importance of events which he has spent a lifetime investigating.<sup>14</sup> In his painstaking examination of the issue, he concludes that the significance of the Bois Caiman ceremony has been overstated, and the prayer of Boukman, if authentic, was evidently not spoken at Bois Caiman.<sup>15</sup> Geggus also downplays the significance of the indigenous religion of Voodoo which for many scholars played a pivotal role in mobilizing the slaves and in the success of the revolution.<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to Geggus’s uncertain interpretation of the function of religion in the revolutionary narrative, I propose that religious imagination did in fact facilitate the process of the revolution’s popularity. The slaves believed that their particular experience was part of a larger cosmic battle in which they were participating. Laurent Dubois advances that “religion helped inspire insurgents, and solidified the power of certain leaders...The history of the revolution, then became part of the religion, some of whose practitioners see the Bois-Caiman ceremony as the founding moment of their religion, a charter both for the gathering of different African nations and for the unification of African-born and creole slaves in pursuit of

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<sup>13</sup> In *Haitian Fiction Revisited* (Pueblo: Passeggiata Press, 1999), 159.

<sup>14</sup> See Gerard Horne’s review of Laurent Dubois’s *Avengers of the New World: The story of the Haitian Revolution*, *Journal of Haitian Studies* 10: 1 (2004): 196-198.

<sup>15</sup> Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 69-80, 81-92; His earliest analysis also includes the following: “Haitian Vodoo in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, Resistance” (1991), 21-51; “Slave Resistance Studies and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt: Some Preliminary Considerations” (Paper # 4), *LACC Occasional papers series* (1983), 1-36.

liberation.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, historian Carolyn Fick affirms that some erroneous accounts did pass on in the oral transmission as well as in the historical reconstruction of the events surrounding the Bois Caiman conference. Fick boldly declares, “It seems clear that this incident constituted the beginning of the insurrection, planned for the following week.”<sup>18</sup> Although detailed contemporary written reports are scarce, Fick comments, that does not discredit the veracity of the meeting nor undermine the reliability of the subsequent various accounts characterized by some as “pure historical fabrication.”<sup>19</sup> I take a moderate position on this issue as many scholars do. Chiefly, what I am interested in is not so much the historical reliability of the Bois Caiman event, but in the prophetic rhetoric and symbolic meaning of this singular moment as a religiously inspired affair in the achievement of human emancipation at Saint-Domingue. Although, I believe it did happen, it is difficult to establish the specific details associated with the Bois Caiman experience. The prayer of Boukman particularly has functioned historically and symbolically as a necessary founding myth in the making of the Haitian Revolution and for Haitian self-identification. Caribbean literary scholars and historians generally appeal to this reference point to argue for the African presence and African cultural preservation in the New World (i.e. Alejo Carpentier, Antonio Benitez-Rojo, Aime Cesaire, Jean-Price Mars, Silvio

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<sup>17</sup> *Avengers of the New World*, 101-102.

<sup>18</sup> *The Making*, 261.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 93. A similar position is substantiated by these scholar-historians: Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle* (Quebec: Editions Lemeac, 1973); John Thornton, “On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas,” *The Americas* 44:3 (1988), 261-278; Laurent Dubois, “Le Vodou, Miroir de l’histoire: Dialogue,” *Tabou: Revue du Musée d’Ethnologie de Genève* 5 (2007): 325-340; Michael Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Torrent-Saillant, Edouard Glissant, George Lamming, and Edward Brathwaite). What appears remarkable to me, nonetheless, is the way creative spirituality or religious beliefs can be used as a form of protest rhetoric to inspire prophetic hope and democratic freedom.

Historian Keith Jenkins reminds us that “the past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart.”<sup>20</sup> History, in this vein, is not the exact account of the past, but the integration of legends and myths. In many cases, historical memory is constructed for political, religious, and social purposes. As a reality imposed on the present, the past as historical memory is conveniently sourced in the forging and intersection of facts and myths. Consequently, my commitment here is not to discern what is truth or untruth, but rather to excavate how ideas work and function in the human narrative. Precisely, I am concerned myself with the powerful influence of ideas to make things happen that were once thought *simplement impensable* (“simply unthinkable”). The Haitian revolution is a basic example of this realization. From this perspective, my level of engagement with the Bois Caiman question is very broad. I treat both its creative myths and historical facts concurrently as guides for cultural learning and intellectual orientation about revolutionary Haiti, and its importance for black revolutionary movements. In the subsequent paragraphs, I want to consider further the rhetoric of the prayer.

If words have the power to incite a great revolution and alter the old consciousness of slaves into a new consciousness of liberative acts of self-sacrifice, similarly they possess exceptional vitality in the forging of national identity. In other words, in the case of the Haitian experimentation, language and its accomplished events are intrinsically connected in the

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<sup>20</sup> *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 5.

construction of an ideologically Haitian identity and the nation's cultural history. The prayer below which Boukman delivers in the memorable night of August 14, 1791, I propose, could be regarded as a text with a performative function. I am stressing the functional objective of this speech for intellectual orientations as well as for cultural practicality, to be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs. Briefly, before moving to the exegetical nature of the prayer, I want to discuss the theoretical nature of speech acts theory as well as the traditional African rhetorical criticism known as the *Nommo* principle. What interests me the most in this essay is the use of rhetoric as a political tool, in the interest of the enslaved community at Saint-Domingue. In the case of the Haitian Revolution, rhetoric had a political claim, that is, the establishment of the *polis* or the new republic of Haiti, and eventually the cultivating of a hopeful body of citizens who have been former slaves.

From a historical perspective, it is observed that 40 to 50 percent (or 2/3) of the slave population (500,000) in Saint-Domingue during the time of the Revolution (1789-1804) were African-born, in a colony where 90 percent of its population was enslaved.<sup>21</sup> From a cultural context, these African-born slaves and most likely those who were born in the colony would have

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<sup>21</sup> For example, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2005), 19, 30, 39; Carolyn Fick, *The Making Haiti: Saint Domingue Revolution From Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 22-23, 25; David Geggus, *Haitian Revolution Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 5; John Thornton, "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of Caribbean History* 25 (1993): 58–80.

been well versed in Africa's intellectual tradition, disseminating through the art of orature (i.e. vocality, storytelling, poetry, praise singing), and the art of public discourse.<sup>22</sup>

In the well-known text, *How to Do Things with Words* (1974), British analytical philosopher John Langshaw Austin coined the term “performative” suggesting that language is generative or creates actions. This classic work on “speech acts” theory reevaluates the dynamic nature of language and its functionality. Particularly, Austin contends that the chief end of sentences are not merely employed to state facts or describe the nature of things. Performative utterances or “performatives” are sentences of a different nature with no truth-value. They do not describe nor report rather they accomplish and bear a pragmatic force. Austin distinguishes two types of illocutionary act: “performative” locution and “constative” locution. While constative refers to the utterance of a sentence being true or false, that is “saying or describing something,” performative is the uttering of a sentence that is neither true nor false. A performative utterance generates a certain kind of action; it is the “doing” of an action, doing something in saying something or saying something in doing something, which Austin terms “perlocution.” Accordingly, a perlocutionary act is described as the achievement of an action acted upon the listener. In the same vein, Kenneth Burke reminds us that one of the basic functions of rhetoric is to “induce action in people” and that the use of language as a symbolic means is to produce

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<sup>22</sup> Adisa A. Alkebulan, “The Spiritual Essence of African American Rhetoric,” in Ronald L. Jackson III (ed), *Understanding African American rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 23-42; Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 59-80; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 227-267.

cooperation in individuals who are naturally responsive to symbols.<sup>23</sup> In other words, rhetoric is a field of dialogue of motives that seeks identification between author and reader, orator and audience. It presupposes shared human values and common interests as symbols to resolve human conflicts. In the Burkean sense, rhetoric produces identifications which he appropriately calls “rhetorical identification.”<sup>24</sup>

The Burkean thesis is shaped by classical rhetorical reason, its intellectual ancestor. Aristotle articulates the aesthetic use of rhetorical discourse in the service of persuasion, in a given situation. Hence, for Aristotle, rhetoric may be defined as “the means of persuasion available for any subject.”<sup>25</sup> As Austin reminds us, in order for an illocutionary act to accomplish the intended goal three entities must be present: an audience, a convention, and a response without which the performance is not secured; similarly, Aristotle states that the rhetor must consider his audience, the delivery of the speech, and the reception of the given discourse. The three modes of persuasion or goals of communication according to Aristotle are to appeal to reason (*logos*), emotion (*pathos*), and personality or character (*ethos*).<sup>26</sup> As our conversational partners above have informed us that words can be used strategically and performatively to identify shared human characteristics (Burke), produce a perlocutionary effect (Austin), or

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<sup>23</sup> *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), 42-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-28.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Hertzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37.

have a psychological impact (Aristotle) on the listener, therefore, we must now orient ourselves intellectually to the African *nommo* principle, which most slaves in the colony were nurtured in.

In 1948, French ethnologist, Marcel Griaule, published an important work entitled, *Dieu d'eau, entretiens avec Ogotemméli*, which was translated in English as *Conversations with Ogotemméli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* in 1965. Like the previous work, *La Philosophie bantoue* (1945), both R. P. Placide Tempels and Griaule agree that Africans before their encounter with Westerners, possessed an elaborate system of thought that revealed a complex philosophical, religious, and cosmological systems similar to that of the Europeans.<sup>27</sup> *Ogotemméli*, a sage of the Dogon people of southern Mali whom Griaule interviewed extensively over a period of thirty-three days, described to the latter the creation story in which the word *nommo* or *nummo* is used.<sup>28</sup> The Malian sage explains the *nommo* concept.

The Creator, Amma, sends *nommo*, the word (in the collective sense of speech), to complete the spiritual and material reorganization of the world and to assist humans in the forward movement in history and society. It is through the word, *Ogotemméli*, tells us, that weaving, forging, cultivating, building family and community, and making the world good are made possible. Inherent in the concept of *nommo* are the triple aspects and elements of water, wind, and word, symbolizing, respectively, the life force (animation), life essence (spirit), and life creation (creativity).<sup>29</sup>

What stands out in this statement is the generative power of the word. As an inherent and creative force, *nommo* calls things into existence and gives life. Karenga posits that the performative character of the word bears infinite meanings, forges and molds a suitable world for

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<sup>27</sup> D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 68.

<sup>28</sup> Karenga, 8; Masolo, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Karenga, *ibid.*

people to live in and enjoy, and “becomes a fundamental framework for developing, doing, and understanding rhetorical practices—both its oral and literary forms.”<sup>30</sup> *Nommo* then can be conceived as the integrative principle permeating all things that gives matters the fact of being and the fact of expressing, and as the vital life force that influences things in the shape of the spoken word and signifies Black diasporic rhetorical discourse and rhetorical criticism.<sup>31</sup> Not only *Nommo* defines African public discourse. Molefi Asante comments, “the vocal-expressive modality that dominates all communication culture.”<sup>32</sup> Asante sees the cultural continuity of the African *nommo* principle in the diaspora landscapes; in an expressive sense, it manifests itself as a life force in dance, music, and speech.<sup>33</sup>

In African traditional culture, rhetoric as functional art and performative discourse is used for the purpose of building communal balance, achieving cooperation and effective action, and maintaining the good of humanity. In other words, classical African public discourse is driven by the welfare of the community and bears a rigid ethical demand, as it does in the Aristotelian framework. Culture and rhetoric are therefore intertwined. As culture is socially constructed, in the same vein, rhetorical discourse has a social milieu and is shaped by various cultural artifacts. Perhaps we can consent with Steven Mailloux that rhetoric and culture are

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Jahn, Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (New York: Grove, 1994) 124; Molefi Asante and Stephen Robb. *The voice of Black Rhetoric* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1971).

<sup>32</sup>Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

modes of inquiry; the former is the “materiality of cultural politics in discourse.”<sup>34</sup> Rhetoric provides a frame for defining culture and theory; rhetorical community is defined by local practices as well as historical beliefs.<sup>35</sup> By employing the phrase “rhetorical community,” I accentuate the political value of persuasive speech to construct and nurture a given community, as it is also the same case for a given community to shape the content and form of the rhetor’s speech. A clear example of the phenomenon of “speech community” can be found in Isocrates’s famous statement below. The latter was convinced that public speaking as persuasive speech should have both political and ethical implications. He then declares:

We are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things honorable and base; and if it were not for these ordinances we should not be able to live with one another.<sup>36</sup>

African rhetoric is chiefly committed to a theory of the unified life, what Plato famously calls “the good life.” From this perspective, rhetorical discourse as speech event, or “signifying” as Henry Louis Gates terms it, may be interpreted as an attitude toward language as well as a

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<sup>34</sup> *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 158.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; Carolyn R. Miller, “The Polis as Rhetorical Community,” *Rhetorica* 11:3 (1993): 211–40.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Miller, “The Polis as Rhetorical Community,” 216.

means of cultural self-definition, cultural participation, and cultural emancipation.<sup>37</sup> I want to prioritize these three important elements: cultural self-definition, cultural participation, and cultural emancipation, as they will be helpful in our interpretation of Boukman's prayer.

So far, I have attempted to demonstrate that the goal of revolutionary rhetoric of freedom is the striving by enslaved Africans to establish an emancipative community through the radical revolutionary words, and correspondingly the restoration of communal coherence, and therefore, completeness, that has been severed by the strength of slavery and its dreadful mechanisms. Zora Neale Hurston, in her famous novel, *Mules and Men*, speaking through a character, comments that "language is the last weapon left to the powerless."<sup>38</sup> The insistence on the liberative and constructive character of language is a pervasive concept in Black Atlantic literary tradition, in the best interest of the community. I underscore the idea of "community" because African people believe that they live and exist in community. Apart from the community, the individual is ineffective, life is meaningless. In fact, the popular African saying states: "it takes a village to raise a child." Notably, African traditional public discourse is done for and in the interest of the community. The latter is both the engaging audience and participant in the oratorical process of delivery and reception.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For example, see Garner and Calloway-Thomas, "African American Orality: Expanding Rhetoric," in Ronald L. Jackson III (ed.), *Understanding African American rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 52-54; Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1989); Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, 110-126.

<sup>38</sup> *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 135.

<sup>39</sup> Asante, 59-80.

The prayer of Boukman can be classified into different rhetorical strategies as shown below. At this point, I am employing a non-conventional rhetorical paradigm based on the previous discussion I undertook on the various possible repercussions of performative utterances and the *Nommo* principle. This take is significant as I attempt to elevate the creative function of rhetorical declaratives and draw attention to their various possibilities. I then reference these rhetorical strategies throughout this section, as a means to reflect on the intended goal as well as the psychological effect on the received listener/audience. First, the rhetoric of conspiracy or rhetoric of exhortation expresses the actions of plots including fatal words and secrecy. It is very deliberate when demands are not met. Second, the rhetoric of terror or rhetoric of fear is a particular strategy where language functions as a weapon to incite obsessive fear, extreme terror, and provoke the opponent. Third, the rhetoric of reversal expresses profound discontent with the social order; it aims not at reforming but demolishing the complete system.

<b>Rhetoric of terror/Rhetoric of fear</b>	<b>Rhetoric of conspiracy/Rhetoric of exhortation</b>	<b>Rhetoric of reversal</b>
“Our God who is good to us orders us to avenge our wrongs”	“Listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of us all”	“Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites”
“The God of the whites orders crime”		
“Who has so often caused us to weep”		

TABLE 1. RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES AND PATTERNS IN BOUKMAN’S DISCOURSE.

In Boukman’s discourse, there lies an identity of interest expressed in this rhetoric of conspiracy: *Coute la liberte li pale nan coeur nous tous*: “Listen to the voice of liberty which

speaks in the hearts of all of us.” As it is observed, the slaves reinforced their communal loyalty by asserting an “intuitive conviction” and made a conscious appeal to the primacy of liberty—since it is likely that collective cooperation will make possible the opportunity for a new beginning—ultimately a better life out of slavery, than any individual slave would have achieved if he were to act alone for his own gain.<sup>40</sup> The shared purpose whose goal was the complete exodus out of the sphere of subjugation, slavery itself, is the founding philosophy of the Haitian revolution. Collective determination in the form of a shared vision has contributed to an independent Haiti. This is what Frantz Fanon attempts in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), the process of making the subaltern *actional*. My argument here does not suggest that the slaves were actualizing their recognition; instead my insistence is that they were establishing recognition through absolute self-assertion on the night of August 14, 1791.

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<sup>40</sup> I contextualize what John Rawls tries to do in the first chapter 1: “Justice As Fairness” in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The President and Fellows of Harvard college, 1971). John Rawls describes the role of justice in social cooperation and writes “...Although, a society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage, it is typically marked by a conflict as well as by an identity of interests. There is an identity of interest since social cooperation makes possible a better life for all than any would have if each were to live solely by his own efforts. There is a conflict of interests since persons are not indifferent as how the greater benefits produced by their collaboration are distributed, for in order to pursue their ends they each prefer a larger to a lesser share. A set of principles is required for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine this division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive shares. These principles are the principles of social justice: they provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation” (4). In the case of Bois-Caiman, it was the first Haitian congress in which common interests and objectives were discussed, with the firm conviction to destroy slavery and be free. Instead of perceiving the event reflecting “conflict of interests” as Rawls remarks in the case of social cooperation, I see a set of thought-movements that express clearly a common identity of interest. This way of thinking was necessary in the initial stage of the revolution.

The slave plantation was a “zone of nonbeing,” in the words of Fanon, an ontological sphere of nothingness. What is then the meaning of freedom in the Boukman’s discourse? What is the relationship between the “zone of nonbeing” and freedom? As far as I can discern, the meaning of freedom as expressed in the declarative statement: “Listen to the voice of liberty speaking in the hearts of us all” is first a thinking process. By that, I suggest it is the freedom of the mind and of the spirit. Freedom of the mind involves the ultimate liberation of the self and the physical body. This particular way of theorizing freedom is often translated into created action in order to orchestrate new beginnings, new sets of relationships and values. The concrete example of this phenomenon was the immediate attack on the white masters and their belongings, including the slave plantations and their mechanics.

Furthermore, the above text clearly indicates that self-determination and self-expression of the slaves are inseparable ideas in the way that freedom’s concept was formulated. What slave revolutionaries wanted first is existential freedom, the freedom to be; once that is achieved physical freedom will follow automatically. Paulo Freire illustrates this so well in this famous statement: “Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion.”<sup>41</sup> Freire does not stress the idea that existential freedom also requires action. It is the subsequent action that establishes material freedom, in the case of Saint-Dominguan slaves.

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<sup>41</sup> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 47.

In short, freedom according to the observable text encompasses total liberation: (1) the freedom of the mind (psychological freedom), (2) the freedom of existence (existential freedom), and (3) the freedom of the body (physical freedom). Collectively these ideas project the phenomenon of liberating praxis, an informed action. Second, it appears that freedom or liberty is represented also as a movement that is, the process of transitioning from slavery to freedom. In this way we can read Boukman’s discourse as a set of discursive movements and various engaging activities involving three entities: God, the whites, and the slaves. This is explained explicitly as a three-party interaction: (1) we are informed about what God does, and where he dwells, (2) subsequently followed by what the whites do, and (3) also what the slaves do, and the God-slave relationship. This phenomenon can be illustrated as such in the noted table below:

<b>God</b>	<b>The Whites</b>	<b>The Slaves</b>	<b>God and the Slaves</b>
Action 1: He makes the sun.	Action 1: The whites caused us to weep.	Action 1: We will avenge our wrongs.	Action 1: God watches over the slaves.
Action 2: He gives us light.	Action 2: All they are doing...	Action 2: Throw away the symbol of the white’s God.	Action 2: God gives them light.
Action 3: He orders us to avenge our wrongs.			Action 3: God orders the slaves to do good works.
Movement 1: He sees all the whites are doing.	Movement 1: They do crimes.	Movement 1: Listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of us all.	Movement 1: God is good to the slaves.
Movement 2: He will direct our arms and aid us.	Movement 2: All they are doing...		Movement 2: God will aid the slaves.

TABLE 2. THREE-PARTY INTERACTION. LITERARY MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES IN BOUKMAN’S DISCOURSE.

What is more remarkable about the text is that ultimate liberty will come with divine assistance. The slaves believed God was the author of their freedom. This is explicit in the call for divine vindication embedded in this phrase: “Our God who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs.” “He will direct our arms and aid us,” indicates a sense of divine closeness. The God of the slaves is not a distant deity. The God who is near the most oppressed slaved is a warrior and a vengeful being. He will fight for and with them because *He is the God of the oppressed*. God’s act of executing justice and vindicating their cause revealed that he was in solidarity with the most vulnerable and exploited group in the colonial hierarchy. This is consistent with Makandal’s belief and now Boukman’s theological conviction that the whites were damned by God because they oppressed the slaves ruthlessly. As Boukman stresses, though hidden in the web of clouds, God never ceases to watch over the slaves. “They took God as their witness, Michel Laguerre comments, and were fully convinced that God was on their side—this explains their zeal.”<sup>42</sup>

The Bois Caiman moment is a historic example on the use of religion in the interest of politics and communal emancipation. For example, the prayer of Boukman envisioned a new theological conversation in forms of (divine) vindication and collective solidarity across the Black Atlantic. I argue that if Boukman is not the first who spoke of a black God, he is certainly among the earliest to express this view and the earliest to articulate the notion of a black theology of emancipation. In other words, the prayer of Boukman could be interpreted in the tradition of black theology of resistance and freedom. Black liberation theology or theology of

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<sup>42</sup> *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (London: MacMillan Press LTD, 1989), 63.

liberation is a critique of western global dominance and the hegemony of Eurocentric theological discourse. Liberation theology is anticolonial, anti-imperial, and anti-oppression. As Christopher Rowland reminds us, “The key thing is that one first of all *does* liberation theology rather than learns about it. Or, to put it another way, one can only learn about it by embarking on it.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, black liberation theology is emancipative praxis, and argues that liberation of the poor and the oppressed is the heart of Christian theology and the message of Jesus. It is a relational form of theological discourse on the thought of and about God and God’s relationship with the social order and the poor. A constructive theology of liberation calls for democratic intervention, “provides a basis for the radical democratic social transformation of contemporary society...and is also rooted in the social and political realities of poor and marginalized people.”<sup>44</sup> Constructive liberation theology insists on the principles of justice, truth, peace, and the participation of the most disheartened in the political order. Constructive liberation theology contends that the commitment to the liberation of the poor is not an “option,” and the ultimate

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<sup>43</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 322. Seminal studies on Liberation theology include the following: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1971) and *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983); James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Book, 1975); Jean-Bertrand Aristide, *Théologie et politique* (Quebec, Canada: Les Editions du CIDIHCA, 1992), and *In The Parish of the Poor: Writings from Haiti* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994); Leonardo Boff and Clovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> Reiland Rabaka, Reiland, *Against Epistemic Apartheid: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Disciplinary Decadence of Sociology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 249.

objective of a theology of liberation is the social salvation of the poor.<sup>45</sup> As Gustavo Gutierrez argues, liberation theology considers the conditions of oppression and the marginalization of the disheartened. Liberation theology as personal and collective transformation allows us to “live with profound inner freedom in the face of every kind of servitude...” and liberation from sin attacks which attacks the deepest of all servitude.”<sup>46</sup> Suffice to say, liberation theology denounces all kinds of human oppression, marginalization, and discrimination, and stresses human dignity, “the option for the poor,” and argues that the will of the (poor) as the expression of the will of God. Therefore, God of liberation is the God of the oppressed. Notice below the sharp theological distinction or contrast in the prayer:

(1) The God of the white man inspires with crime, but our God calls upon us to do good works. Our God who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arm and aid us.

(2) Throw away the symbol of the God of the whites who has so often caused us to weep and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks (or sings) in the hearts of us all.

First, Boukman posits that the God of the whites who inspires injustice and crime is the oppressor; that is to say, he is not the God of the oppressed, the slaves. The enslaved Africans in colonial Saint-Domingue-Haiti were the most oppressed group. As the racially disheartened-class with no socialpolitical power and status, they were exploited economically by white masters, supported by the institution of slavery and the Christian religion. Second, Boukman’s speech

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<sup>45</sup> Alex Dupuy, Dupuy, *Haiti in the New World Order: The Limits of Democratic Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 83-4.

<sup>46</sup> Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds), *Expanding the view: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the future of liberation theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 12-25.

embraces the notion of a black, anti-white, but *still* Christian God, the deity in opposition to the God of the Whites. Evidently, Boukman presents a God who was in solidarity with the enslaved, the lowest class in the colonial social ladder. The religious leader sets the contrasts between the white God who orders black oppression and justifies black suffering and the black God who desires black freedom and ultimately will deliver the enslaved population. However, the notion of a “Black God” in Boukman’s prayer is “more than a psychological disposition of black people but arises from a faithful examination of Scripture,” as theologian James Cone reminds us.<sup>47</sup> For Cone, “the affirmation of the black Christ [God] can be understood when the significance of Jesus’ past Jewishness is related dialectically to the significance of his present blackness.”<sup>48</sup> As it is followed, “The Jewishness of Jesus located him in the context of the Exodus, thereby connecting his appearance in Palestine with God’s liberation of the oppressed Israelites from Egypt.”<sup>49</sup> In the same vein, the blackness of God situated him in the historical trajectory of Saint-Dominguan slavery wherein God’s acting and liberating presence provided hope for the future world of the enslaved. Boukman argues for an understanding of God’s identity with the suffering poor and those who fight on behalf of the emancipation of humanity in this world. Therefore, the blackness of God, according to Boukman’s dictum, is not a mere statement about skin color, but rather, the transcendent assertion that God has not left the oppressed alone in their struggle.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *God of the Oppressed*, 122.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

“Listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us,” was the true voice of freedom, predicating upon the rejection of the white God, white supremacy, and ultimately white Christianity. This refrain followed the slaves in the battlefield and motivated them in the pursuit of independence to the utmost. At the sound of war in the camp, the exhortation was the rhythm of the drum they played, the song of freedom they rehearsed in their march to sacred victory. As the phrase recurred under Boukman’s leadership during the early days of the insurrection as he exhorted the insurgent slaves under his command to attack, this same motto was later repeated under Dessalines’s direction during the final phase of the war of liberty.<sup>51</sup> In short, the slogan was the guiding principle that sustained the revolutionary community throughout to the culmination of Haitian freedom in 1804. These spoken words were engraved on the tablets of the hearts of the oppressed; they lived and moved with them in the construction of a revolutionary narrative. On that famous night of Bois Caiman, the will of the people triumphed; the slave community marched their way daringly to freedom when they resolved to cross the unfree realm of oppression. Accordingly, this war was a just war approved by God. “If God is going to be true to himself, his righteousness must be directed to the helpless and the poor, whose who can expect no security from this world...”<sup>52</sup> God will unquestionably vindicate the poor. As Cone observes, “In the ongoing struggle for meaning in the midst of suffering, there is not intellectual or theoretical answer that will ease the pain of evil and injustice. We solve the mystery of evil’s existence by fighting it. And faith is real only to the degree it endows us with

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<sup>51</sup> Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 93.

<sup>52</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 45.

the courage to fight.”<sup>53</sup> God establishes the right by punishing the wicked and setting free their victims from oppression, an idea that both Cone and Boukman champion.<sup>54</sup> In Black Atlantic radical Christianity, God’s righteousness is identical with the punishment of the oppressors and the colonizers, and divine deliverance is synonymous with the emancipation of the oppressed and the colonized from the bondage of slavery and imperial colonialism. Boukman and Cone articulate that the theme of divine justice is intimately connected to the notion of future hope. The God who establishes the right and eradicates the wrong is the sole basis for the hope that the suffering and dehumanization of victims will be eliminated.<sup>55</sup>

The affirmation of God’s liberating presence in the lives of the poor and the enslaved Africans in their fight for freedom and a dignified life might redirect our theological thinking of a radical understanding of God’s righteousness and faithfulness. God’s righteousness vindication is reserved only for those who come empty-handed, without any economic, political, or social power and status, Cone reminds us. Remarkably, black suffering and white violence are critical concerns both for Boukman and Cone, and for the articulation of a theology of liberation that fosters optimism in the midst of human suffering and the struggle to live in a just world.

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<sup>53</sup> James Cone, “God and the Black Suffering: Calling the Oppressors to Account: God and Black Suffering,” *Anglican Theological Review* 90:4 (2008), 701-712.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

## Some Concluding Thoughts

Persuasive rhetoric has been instrumental in the process of striving for human emancipation as well as in the process of achieving communal humanitarianism in colonial Saint-Domingue. Performative utterances, as I have shown, were contributive in the operation of orchestrating a hopeful republic of Haitian citizenry. The implications of this rhetoric of prayer are many. First, Boukman envisioned a new theological ethics, which challenged the limits of standard Christian theology and classical biblical hermeneutics of God and God's interaction with humanity. Boukman advances a theological doctrine of divine vengeance, which seeks to destroy white supremacy and colonial slavery. He also articulates a theological doctrine of divine justice, which seeks to challenge modern understanding of God's dynamic relationships with evil, and God's inspiring revolutionary and just violence. The God who inspires the spirit of violent revolution against the structures of slavery and white hegemony and global dominance is in the business of affirming the humanity of blacks in the inhuman situation of the institution of slavery and American racism and white supremacy. The prayer of Boukman clearly implies that any constructive theology such as black liberation theology should engage an anti-colonial/imperial politics as much as it engages an anti-white supremacist politics. Critical theory of liberation theology is a critique of all forms of (social) domination and (social) inequalities. This project as theological imagination, which is rooted in the sociopolitical and existential realities of the disheartened and marginalized people, should also provide a basis for effective activism and

“the radical democratic socialist transformation of contemporary society” and the welfare of humanity.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Rabaka, *Against Epistemic apartheid*, 249.

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