Amzat Boukari-Yabara’s portrait of Guyanese scholar and activist Walter Rodney is not a traditional biography, but rather a narrative of the context in which he deployed his work as an historian and a politically engaged contributor to African and Caribbean studies in the 1960s and 1970s. The author, like Rodney himself, believes that the history of African and Afro-diasporic peoples should be written from the Africas and the Americas themselves. Whether writing about the history of the slave trade, the African past, decolonization or black power, the biographer expertly conveys Rodney’s erudition while directing students of these issues toward a broader retrospective, contextualization and actualization of his thought. More than any existing biography or chronicle of Rodney’s life, it is a book that redefines and actualizes what it means to be an “historien engagé,” a politically and socially committed student of the past and its lessons for the present.

**Keywords:** Walter Rodney, Pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism, historien engage, groundings, coloniality, Black Power

Amzat Boukari-Yabara’s portrait of Guyanese scholar and activist Walter Rodney is not a traditional biography, but rather a narrative of the context in which he deployed his work as an historian and a politically engaged contributor to African and Caribbean studies in the 1960s and 1970s. The author, like Rodney himself, believes that the history of African and Afro-diasporic peoples should be written from the Africas and the Americas themselves; the book is described as an “invitation to an intellectual and geographic journey” of the black experience and of Rodney’s engagement with the stakes and controversies of his time. Three dimensions of Rodney’s work receive detailed attention: the impact of slavery on underdevelopment and capitalist modernization, the legacy of colonialism on the Third World, and the challenges of the African revolution in the era of independence, particularly its relevance for the transformation of socialist thought.

Walter Rodney, the son of a member of Cheddi Jagan’s People’s Revolutionary Party, began canvassing for the movement at the age of eleven during the 1953 election. He left Guyana in 1960 to pursue his studies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, at the height of the Cuban Revolution and the civil rights movements in the United States, two developments that Boukari-Yabara documents copiously in the book. Rodney first traveled to Cuba in 1961 and 1962, meeting during his first trip with Fidel Castro, and studied Cuban independence and antiracist movement in...
the 1890s. Committed to anti-colonial struggles, he later joined the School of Oriental and African Studies in London where he developed an acute consciousness of the conservative biases of such scholars as Roland Oliver, John Fage and Richard Gray. As a young student he began meeting with like-minded scholars Richard Small, Norman Girvan, Margaret Carter Hope, Adolf Edwards, Walton Look-Lai and Orlando Patterson in the home of the Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James, who would become his mentor. The author provides detailed biographies of major influences in Rodney's intellectual life. He chronicles James' thought, for example, from the time of his meeting with Leon Trotsky in Mexico to his conflict with Eric Williams in Jamaica, exile in the United States, travels to Ghana, Mali and Tanzania, and final residence in England following his boycott of the 1974 Pan-African Congress. That event, in which tensions erupted between postcolonial African leaders and representatives of the black diaspora in the Americas, will play a significant role in Rodney's development as well, as the young Guyanese historian sought to bridge such divisions in his scholarly and political work.

In 1966, Rodney completed his doctorate after having engaged in archival research in Rome, Lisbon and Seville, and left London to teach in Tanzania, where he would learn Swahili. He published his dissertation on the slave trade in Upper Guinea from 1545 to 1800 in 1970 with Oxford University Press. Attacked by Philip Curtin for neglecting French archives, Rodney challenged the idea that slavery was an African institution somehow inherent to the nature of its peoples, and faulted European imperial powers for extending the institution geographically, politically, legally, economically and socially. His work was critical of the exclusion of Africa from world history; it extensively documented the political history of the Niger River Delta and the Gold Coast, and the internal struggles that caused local elites to enmesh the continent in the European trade and provoking far-reaching disruptions in the historical evolution of African societies. In his detailed review of this phase of Rodney's scholarship, the author engages critics at the time of its publication as well as in the contemporary era, guiding students of African history through the maze of controversies that have plagued the field to this day. He makes the case, with erudition and clarity, for the pioneering nature of Rodney's work in exposing Europe's nefarious impact on local and regional societies.

Rodney went against the grain of Fernand Braudel's sweeping portrayal of the African past as simply a reactive response to European agency and expansion, as well as cultural anthropology's Eurocentric approach to the categorization and description of African systems of thought. He privileged the study of accommodation and resistance to Europe on the local level, and the innovative ways in which Africans confronted foreign economic interests in the resolution of their own internal divisions and agendas. Not content to isolate controversies such as Rodney's quarrel with Curtin's census methodology to quantify the impact of the slave trade, Boukari-Yabara points readers in the direction of other scholars whose research validated aspects of Rodney's critique (Charles Becker, Catherine Conquery-Vidrovitch). More importantly, in the spirit of Rodney's anti-Eurocentric method, he introduces African scholars into the equation, such as historians.
Boubacar Barry, Abdouloaye Bathily and Joseph Inikori, or the geographer Louise-Marie Diop-Maes. Whether writing about the history of the slave trade, the African past, decolonization or black power, the biographer expertly conveys Rodney’s erudition while directing students of these issues toward a broader retrospective, contextualization and actualization of his thought.

In the 1970s, Rodney was part of a global intellectual movement to consider the massive forced deportation of Africans toward the Americas as a foundational, central dimension of the birth of modernity and capitalism, as well as the primary explanation for the subsequent rise of imperialism, colonialism and structural inequality between the Global North and the Global South. Rodney denounced the silences of mainstream historians on the role of the slave trade in the rise of the industrial revolution, and thus the relationship between capitalism and racism. His arguments are fiercely resisted today by prominent figures in the field, such as David Northrup in his recent *Seven Myths of Africa in World History*; and by many others in Western academia for whom the slave trade and colonialism were more costly than beneficial to Europe, and Africans are guilty of deflecting blame for their “misfortunes.”

Boukari-Yabara also mentions that Rodney’s work has been misinterpreted to defend ideas that he did not share. John Thornton, for example, took his arguments on Africans’ historical agency to mean that as the masters of their trade in Africa and a majority of people in the Americas in the early colonial period, they were not, in fact, victims of oppression. Olivier Grenouilleau, the best-selling French scholar of slavery and abolition, also challenged, on the grounds that their local elites were complicit, Africans’ claims that Europeans were directly responsible for their suffering in the transatlantic slave trade. Rodney’s historically grounded and layered understanding of the complex imbrication of European and African agendas is contrasted by the author with other prominent approaches to the history of slavery; for example, Stanley Engermen and Robert Fogel’s *Time on the Cross* infamously claimed that African slaves were better treated in plantations of the South than white workers in Europe.

While Rodney himself did not respond directly to these works, his own writing emphasized that to reduce the history of a people to their experience of oppression diminished their perspective and agency. The history of decolonization and independence is incomplete, he argued, without an understanding of African history before their independence was lost and they became colonies. Accordingly, Rodney was on the front lines of questioning the traditional periodization of such historians as Curtain, Reginald Coupland, Hugh Trever-Roper and countless others, for whom Africa’s struggles with poverty and marginalization – in fact, their very existence as players in modernity - “began” with the partition of the continent by imperialist powers in 1884-1885. Rodney also criticized the “African Renaissance” perspective, which holds that the period of direct colonialism inaugurated by the Berlin Conference was a simple “parenthesis” that did not profoundly alter the structures of African civilizations. Finally, he also dismissed the narrative according to which Africa has not yet begun to emerge from colonial domination. In challenging these three approaches to African history, he placed multifarious expressions of resistance to
“proto-colonialism,” colonialism and post-colonialism at the center of his story, an approach which inspired his seminal work of popular history, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). Boukari-Yabara discusses this book in the context of contemporary scholarship by Paul Baran, Eric Williams, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Abdoulaye Ly and Kenneth Onwuka Dike. The latter two, largely unheralded African historians who are seldom discussed in the genealogy of Pan-Africanism and anti-colonial historiography, are reviewed as examples of “classics” of African thought whom younger generations should incorporate, along with Rodney himself, in their canon of intellectual history.

Rodney also participated in a movement alongside André Gunder-Frank, Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi and Immanuel Wallerstein in a movement to denounce Walter Lewis’ evaluation of the decolonization of Africa as akin to the earlier “take-off” of industrial economies theorized by liberal economists W.W. Rostow and John Kenneth Galbraith. Boukari-Yabara frames the emergence of “dependency theory” in the context of orientalism and the division of labor between academic disciplines in the modern West, which perpetuated “neo-colonialism” and hidebound myths about the dichotomy between “tradition” and “modernity” in the social sciences, particularly the depiction of Africa as static and oriented toward the past until the advent of imperialism. Rodney argued that a critical theory of underdevelopment as a dynamic process of exploitation and pauperization of peoples on the “periphery” of industrial capitalism was necessary. For him, and for the dependency school of critical thought that lay the groundwork for present-day decolonial theory, the Africas (in the plural) and the Americas drove capital accumulation in the period from the Renaissance onward, contributing thereafter to the resolution of the system’s internal crises and contradictions. In the end, the material comforts and social rights afforded workers in the Global North rested on the continued exploitation of those of the Global South, and on the ongoing renewal of racist thought. Rodney took an interest in strikes in twentieth-century Africa, the contours of the continent’s laboring classes, the undermining of autonomous agricultural systems by monoculture, colonial efforts to stymie the emergence of an entrepreneurial class, and the undermining of precolonial African educational systems by colonial institutions and European science.

In the spirit of anthropologist Roger Bastide’s *Les Amériques noires*, Rodney also extensively studied the African diaspora, the role of black women and of African colonial brotherhoods and societies, and the emergence of a new “culture” (as opposed to “ethnicity”) through the experience of slavery, maroonage and emancipation. Boukari-Yabara reviews the field of diaspora studies to illuminate Rodney’s pioneering role in developing such themes as the role of Aja peoples in the creation of Haitian Vaudou, of Yoruba and Ewé in the emergence of Santería and Candomblé, Congolese and Angolan contributions to Afro-Brazil, Akan influences in Jamaican, Virginian and Guyanese cultures. It is often overlooked that new, generic identities – Carabalí in Cuba, Nago in Brazil, etc., were forged in which a wide variety of African peoples collectively participated, developing new “syncretisms” that were not just passive forms of assimilation into colonial cultures.
and institutions, but intentional African strategies of resistance and autonomy. Rodney also discussed the agency of African peoples in the generational renewal of American societies, through cycles of life marked by ritual stages (birth, marriage, sexual relations, death) and specific social activities or representations (beliefs, folklore, dress, language, leisure, food, and work). He pioneered the now widely accepted thesis that African skills and competencies contributed to the development of slave societies, and that strategies of resistance, such as marronage, were often grounded in military practices that developed contemporaneously on the Gold Coast and in Angola. Finally, the origins of Pan-Africanism itself, he argued, can be traced to transnational movements for the abolition of slavery that emphasized intercultural solidarities, the role of women, and fugitive practices of social emancipation and cultural resistance. Abolitionism was not, as Eurocentric historiography claims, simply a movement of Enlightenment ideas birthed in the minds of “great white men.”

Another strength of Boukari-Yabara’s study is his extensive and well-researched account of Black Power, with its roots in the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Martin Delany, Edward Blyden and Marcus Garvey — all influences in Rodney’s thought — receive ample consideration, as do Rodney’s contemporaries Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon. Rodney understood Black Power as a movement that developed primarily in the United States, due to that country’s status as the most developed region within the global capitalist slave system. In 1968, while teaching at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, Rodney himself became a key figure in this tradition when he identified the Rastafari movement in the poor neighborhoods of Kingston as a potentially revolutionary cultural force with broad political and transnational implications. In his *Groundings With My Brothers*, he explored oral history and the critical appropriation of popular knowledge, adopting an approach similar to that of Brazilian popular educator Paolo Freire in documenting the ways in which Rastafari culture upended colonial domination and class prejudice by generating a discourse of everyday resistance with deep roots in African and Afro-diasporic history. Just as his first post-doctoral immersion in the academic and pedagogical debates of Tanzania had rattled his European professors and provoked a backlash against his revisionist historical views, Rodney’s efforts to give voice to the marginalized urban poor, to their spirituality, aesthetics and culture, led to his blacklisting by local authorities and the ensuing “Rodney Riots.” These events marked the emergence of a new generation of young Caribbean black consciousness activists. Amzat Boukari-Yabara once again transcends existing biographical accounts, by dedicating extensive passages of his book to Rastafari history, its ethics, epistemology and discourse, its champions and its critics. Rodney is understood not just as a revolutionary intellectual with unorthodox views, but rather, as a driver of broader intellectual and political debates that profoundly influenced their epoch and how it has been remembered by successive generations.

Conceived as thematic rather than simply chronological, Boukari-Yabara’s book then reverts to Rodney’s experience in Tanzania, which according to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was, in the 1960s, the revolutionary hub of the Swahili Coast and the broader African continent and
Third World. Rodney supported Julius Nyerere’s socialist “Ujamaa” project and participated in the activities of the University Students African Revolutionary Front at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, where he taught the history of world revolutions (leading to his seminal work on the 1917 revolution in Russia). The third chapter discusses the history of Tanzania at length, and documents the development of Rodney’s approach to imperialism in the tradition of Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon and Ernesto “Che” Guevara. He outlines a “Synthesis, Cartography and Genealogy of Pan-Africanism” leading up to the 1974 congress, a period during which Rodney developed a scathing critique of governing African elites and of African nationalism, which he believed balkanized the movement and caused Kwame Nkrumah’s original Pan-African vision to be undermined by parochial interests. Boukari-Yabara expands on Rodney’s letter to the Sixth Congress to assess the evolution of Pan-Africanism from the Ghanaian leader’s death in 1966 to the African Union in the 1990s and beyond, lamenting that anti-imperialism has declined, offering a critical appraisal of dependency theory (Samir Amin’s “disconnection” thesis), and analyzing the impact of neoliberalism on African political discourse.

In Tanzania between 1969 and 1974, Rodney came to the realization that he would have a greater impact in the Caribbean as a revolutionary from the diaspora. Upon his arrival in Georgetown, however, the regime of Forbes Burnham blocked his candidacy to teach at the University of Guyana and every subsequent effort he made to gain employment, even at the high school level. In this final stage of his life, while still in his young thirties, he turned down appointments in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Barbados, Trinidad, Holland, England, Canada and the United States, Rodney decided to engage the Burnham regime and the complex racial politics upon which his power rested. Instead, he founded the Guyanese Working People’s Alliance (WPA) in 1974 to overcome divisions in the left, particularly between black and Indian workers, with the goal of building a multiracial, counter-cultural mass movement. He denounced state socialism and its ideological underpinnings as distorted conservative black national pride similar to that promulgated by the Duvalier dynasty in Haiti. He wrote his posthumously published History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905 (1981), now a classic of Caribbean labor history, in which he analyzed the origins of the divisions between people of Indian and African descent in Guyana, and of Guyanese underdevelopment and political authoritarianism. During this period, despite his non-violent stance and pedagogical rather than electoral approach to cultural and political militancy, Rodney faced persecution from the Burnham regime; still, he supported its strategic allies in the region, from Cuba to the Maurice Bishop’s New Jewel movement in Grenada. The reader is led through the complexities of Guyanese society and history, much in the same way that Rodney would have presented it himself as an historian and an actor of revolutionary change. In this section as elsewhere throughout the book, the impression one has is that rather than writing about Rodney, Boukari-Yabara is accompanying him through his train of thought, dialoguing with his supporters and detractors, contextualizing his arguments, and following up on the broader implications of his conclusions.
It is clear throughout that Rodney always rejected the status of “official” or mainstream intellectual, preferring to make history, as a self-reflective object of political and social transformation, accessible to people outside or on the fringes of academia, to artists, women, youth, poor and marginalized, working-class sectors of the population. Like Paulo Freire, Edward Said and other “itinerant” radical thinkers, he consciously sought to immerse himself in a world beyond that in which he was born, in order to understand his own origins as a black person from the Caribbean with historical and existential origins in Africa and in the colonial experience. Boukari-Yabara’s book reads like a memoir that Rodney himself might have written in our time, had the Burnham regime afforded him the opportunity to live beyond the age of 38. In a tribute to the role of resilience in Afro-diasporic history, the author acknowledges the work of Pat Rodney and her daughters to further the late revolutionary’s work through the Walter Rodney Foundation in Atlanta. More than any existing biography or chronicle of Rodney’s life, it is a book that redefines and actualizes what it means to be an “historien engagé,” a politically and socially committed student of the past and its lessons for the present.