Introduction: Speaking of Freedom

> I will fight for *freedoms,* but I will not speak untroubled of *freedom.*[1]

> If there were not something like "freedom," we would not speak of it.[2]

> I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me. During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning.[3]

> You can see that "there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintops of our desires."[4]

Can we speak of freedom? Should we avoid speaking of freedom? Two leading French intellectuals, both deeply committed to understanding and intervening in the events of our time, speak of their wariness of *liberté.* Two revolutionaries, both dedicated to the struggle for the liberation of their people from repressive regimes, speak of an unquenchable desire for a freedom only realized in dreams. In this work, all the questions arise here, between this wariness and this yearning, and ultimately between a host of related associations or dissociations: reflection and action, skepticism and faith, philosophy and politics, indeterminacy and determinacy, transcendence and immanence, *freedom* and *freedoms.*

Jean-Luc Nancy begins *The Experience of Freedom* with a description of the divorce recently occurring between a common, universally recognized notion of freedom, taken for granted to such an extent that equality, fraternity, and community have taken a back seat to demanding an

ethico-political freedom, and "what elsewhere remains questioned, under this same name, by a thinking still committed in a thousand ways to reinitiating its entire tradition."[5] In other words, between an ethico-juridico-political demand or defense of freedom, and a philosophical, indeterminate freedom; or between the precise determinations that are freedoms and an "Idea" of freedom that is promised by these freedoms (1–2). The consequence, Nancy argues, is that evil has come to embody all that threatens or destroys the freedoms that come under the rubric of democracy. But the good of the idea of freedom has become thoroughly indeterminate, defined only as the negative of this evil (2). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the current rhetoric of the U.S. government's "war on terror"; a war waged in the name of a nebulous notion of freedom uncritically associated with the good, the right, or the true. Those who so much as question the underlying assumptions and vested interests of this freedom are castigated as the "evil-doers."

Freedoms do not grasp the stakes of freedom, Nancy claims (2). Under this condition, can the philosopher do anything other than speak of *freedoms* and leave freedom itself unspoken, unthought? What is at stake for philosophy and politics in this question? While Nancy suggests that thinking demands this thinking of freedom, in another sense, one can only speak "about" freedom. What remains, beyond this "about," we might ask? Philosophically, whether articulated by Beauvoir, Sartre, Foucault, or Fanon, discourses on liberté often revert to a discussion *about* freedom, not *of* freedom. Freedom itself, if this may be said meaningfully at all, is assumed to be the ineffable or indeterminate—an elusive beyond, an escape from power and politics—an assumption left unquestioned while the manifestations or actualizations of freedom are investigated. What can it mean to speak of freedom *itself*? Should we be asking this question at all? For Nancy, it is the self-evident meaning of freedom—"more or less that of a free will—coupled with the moral self-evidence of the necessity of preserving the rights of this freedom"—that constitutes one of the main obstacles to thinking freedom (3).

Then there is this unshakeable desire for freedom; a desire that has shaped an idea of freedom as the right to self-determination, yet that remains a desire for freedom as absolute other. "If there were not something like 'freedom,' we would not speak of it," writes Nancy (8). Is freedom an irreconcilable aporia? For if freedom were purely "free," signifying a total lack of constraints—sheer indeterminacy—we would not be able to speak of it at all. If, on the other hand, in speaking of freedom we render it com-

pletely determined, this is not freedom either. A complicated relationship appears between an indeterminate freedom that can only be imagined, and its determined manifestations—between freedom and freedoms.

This is hardly a new concern. In the vast history of Western philosophy's tangled and sometimes tortured engagement with the idea of freedom, this complicated relationship has been variously articulated and negotiated. The disjuncture between *freedom* and *freedoms* is visible in the shopworn discussions of the relationship between freedom and necessity and in the historical distinctions that thinking freedom engenders: between thought and experience, reflection and action, transcendence and immanence, and above all, philosophy and politics. Consider for example, that two of the major canonical figures responsible for bringing the issue of human liberty into philosophical discourse seek to distance themselves from a particular discussion of freedom in the tradition of Western philosophy. After admitting that civil freedom is accompanied by moral freedom, Rousseau emphatically declares that the philosophical notion of freedom has no part in his discussion of the human right to freedom.[6] Mill similarly remarks that the subject of his text *On Liberty* is not the philosophical opposition between the liberty of the will and necessity, but social or civil liberty.[7] Both contribute then, to a view of *freedoms*, necessary for the peaceful existence of a political community, as distinct from *freedom*, the natural liberty of the will that philosophy attributes to humankind.

This qualification has maintained its place in current debates on freedom. In her remarkable introduction to *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Wendy Brown echoes Rousseau and Mill when she suggests that the purpose of her project is not to reflect on the genealogy or history of freedom as a concept, but as a practice. Conceptualizations of freedom "revisit us with the most troubling kind of idealism," Brown argues; an idealism that fails to acknowledge "the local, historical, and contextual character of freedom."[8] Furthermore, she adds, as a concept, "freedom" is elusive and has easily been appropriated by liberal regimes for the most cynical and unemancipatory political ends. For Brown, freedom is neither concept nor tangible entity, but a practice that develops in opposition to unfreedom, however it is locally conceived (6).

Thus from the start of her project, politics and philosophy, practice and conceptualization are set at odds against each other. We witness the perceived clash between a philosophical reflection on freedom and the desire for a political freedom defined as "self-legislation," as sharing in power

and generating a future; a freedom unfettered by the paradoxical effects of philosophical abstractions. Significantly, Brown asks whether we have at the close of the twentieth century, lost our way in pursuing this desire for political freedom. She elaborates:

> Might the desire for some degree of collective self-legislation, the desire to participate in shaping the conditions and terms of life, remain a vital element—if also an evidently ambivalent and anxious one—of much agitation under the sign of progressive politics? Equally important, might the realization of substantive democracy continue to require a desire for political freedom, a longing to share in power rather than be protected from its excesses, to generate futures together rather than navigate or survive them? And have we, at the close of the twentieth century, lost our way in pursuing this desire? With what consequences? (4)

Brown's questions are motivated by a belief that Western intellectuals and political activists have grown "disoriented about the meaning and practice of political freedom" (4). In fact, she alludes to this disorientation frequently throughout the introduction, alongside criticisms of the various philosophical and political factors that Brown argues contributed to "assaults" on the premises of freedom. Partly to blame are political factors such as the conservative political culture of the United States in the 1980s for narrowing an already narrow sense of liberal freedom; the abandonment of freedom as an element of the communist project; or the forgetfulness of Western leftists regarding the power of the state and capitalism as sites of domination (9–10). Most importantly for my purposes here, she adds that developments in philosophy, feminism, postcolonialism, and cultural theory have also "eroded freedom's ground" swept as it is "onto the dust-heap of anachronistic, humanistic, androcentric, subject-centered, and 'Western' shibboleths" (18).

It may seem here that Brown wants to maintain an Enlightenment spin on the subject and a coherent ground for freedom, yet she promotes the idea that freedom is not, and should not be, without its paradoxes. She criticizes an identity politics, for example, that adopts a mantra of "empowerment" built on an underlying assumption that freedom is beyond power. On the contrary, freedom never eludes power. It is a project or struggle "flanked" by the problem of power on all sides, Brown writes, and will never be achieved (25). In suggesting that freedom will never be achieved however, Brown inadvertently separates a freedom as practice from a pure freedom that is indeed beyond power, albeit unattainable. It is a move we will witness repeatedly in the following pages. Despite this, Brown criticizes

contemporary theory, specifically poststructuralist formulations of the subject as brought into being by, and as an effect of, subjection, for rendering freedom "utterly paradoxical" (5).

Have we "lost" our way in pursuing the desire for freedom? What does this presuppose about the freedom we once apparently knew? Can one read a similar, if less explicit nostalgia in Nancy's complaint that the idea of freedom has become indeterminate, that we must think freedom beyond the "obstacles" of self-evident meanings of freedom? These sentiments are noteworthy not for the wariness of the philosophical abstraction we read in Brown, Rousseau, or Mill, but for protesting too much. What is at stake for a politicized freedom in thinking a philosophical freedom? Why is it necessary for these thinkers to mark the distinction with some forcefulness, even some contempt for a philosophical contamination of what are thought to be purely political concerns?

The Aporia of Freedom

We must wonder, after reading these protests against a philosophical thinking of freedom, who suggested freedom was *only* an idea? In the most pivotal historical sites of philosophy's engagement with the paradoxes of freedom we confront head-on the challenges in theorizing a uniquely *human* freedom, one that brings an idealistic or abstract concept of freedom to bear on civil, individual, and collective freedoms. While freedom is most often associated with a human propensity for autonomous thought and self-legislation, philosophy has always struggled with precisely how this autonomy can coexist with the law or historical necessity. This struggle provides an engaging foray into a relationship that has always perturbed philosophical reflection: between philosophy and politics.

In *Leviathan,* Hobbes famously defines freedom as "the absence of external impediments."[9] Certainly, as Isaiah Berlin argues, such a negative freedom—being unconstrained by others in pursuing one's desires and achieving one's goals or purposes—is the most visible view of political freedom in the liberal tradition.[10] As Berlin suggests, Mill is probably the most forceful proponent with his invectives against uniformity and the "tyranny of the majority" that cramps all individual creativity and genius. Interference with the sovereignty of the individual is only warranted in the name of preventing harm to others. "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign."[11]

While law is expected to rein in certain excessive human tendencies—it poses as a necessary impediment then, or "fetter"—this tradition assumes that a minimum area of personal freedom must not be violated. Where the line is to be drawn, as Berlin puts it, is a matter of haggling.[12] This is where Locke parts company with Hobbes for example, arguing that freedom is not for one to do as he pleases, but to be under government, under legislative rule common to all in a society; a liberty, he states, "to follow my own will in all things, where the rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man."[13] Freedom in these instances is always in tension with power. As an "absence of external impediments" it is unalloyed when ungraspable by the reaches of power, and contaminated when impinged upon by another's freedom to dominate. There is no paradox here: the freedom of the liberal individual to choose as he or she sees fit, is undermined by the limitations power imposes.

In Kant we often find the same shifting between freedom and necessity, between the freedom of the individual and the necessity of the law to respect collective freedoms, that we find in Hobbes and Locke. If we look at his early political writings, for example, we note a conception of right that echoes Hobbes in significant ways. Despite the subtitle, "Against Hobbes," Kant does not deviate much from his precursor's argument when he writes the following:

> *Right* is the restriction of each individual's freedom so that it harmonises with the freedom of everyone else (in so far as this is possible within the terms of a general law.) And *public right* is the distinctive quality of the *external laws* which make this constant harmony possible. Since every restriction of freedom through the arbitrary will of another party is termed *coercion*, it follows that a civil constitution is a relationship among *free* men who are subject to coercive laws, while they retain their freedom within the general union with their fellows.[14]

It isn't clear how this is a criticism of Hobbes, particularly since Kant adds that each individual may seek his happiness in whatever way he sees fit, as long as he does not infringe upon the freedom of others to pursue their own happiness in accordance with "a workable general law" (74). In *The Metaphysics of Morals* he sharpens this definition of right: "Any action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law."[15] An injustice is committed against an individual then, when anyone hinders him or her in an action or situation. Like Hobbes, it appears that for Kant in these passages, humans act

violently and malevolently unless coerced by an external legislation. He even refers to this as a "state of nature" that must be abandoned.[16]

While Kant reveals the same negative freedom we find in Hobbes and Locke, he argues against the notion that a social contract restricts my freedom. It is not a trade-off, giving up one part of freedom to enjoy the rest.[17] The universal law imposes an obligation on me, but this does not entail a restriction of my freedom: "reason merely says that individual freedom *is* restricted in this way by virtue of the idea behind it."[18] In other words, Kant is suggesting that freedom *itself* is already restricted. It has an "evil heart" caused by the human propensity for evil as well as good; a heart that Kant describes as *verderbten*, corrupted and depraved. Jason Wirth points out that this term relates to *verderben*, meaning to spoil or putrefy, which alludes to a freedom once alive but now cut off from its source of life and decaying. He elaborates:

> It is as if freedom expresses itself in such a way that it has the propensity to cut itself off from itself and express itself only in dead and dying ways, in slavish and subjected ways. Freedom has the propensity, so to speak, to kill itself, to ruin itself, to fall into putrefaction. In this sense, one could already say that freedom gets all turned around, expressing itself as slavery.[19]

This is a remarkable statement that exposes the fascinating and agonizing aporia of freedom, one not only restricted to a philosophical thinking of freedom, but that appears time and time again in the political struggles for liberation. Later, in Schelling, this same aporia is recuperated, and again much later, in Derrida. We will also witness how freedom "kills itself" in political practice: the revolution that dies as it hurries toward its utopian conclusion; the political struggle that leaps from the rejection of one system into the enslavement of another.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant's association of freedom with thought is explicit in that our will is shown to be capable of being determined not only by desires and interests, but by self-legislating reason. I am free, and therefore freely give myself the law. Freedom is autonomy and self-determination; an autonomy of pure reason, separated from nature and the sensual. Hegel follows Kant in this vein with the idea that a truly free will understands that freedom must be committed to engagements necessarily. Modern political freedoms are therefore rooted in our consciousness that we are free and self-determining. Hegel believed that the tremendous changes taking place in Europe and America since the 1770s

and 1780s were proof that humans were finally aware that their essence lies in freedom and self-determination.[20]

It is reason however that constitutes the most powerful liberating force for Hegel. Freedom is thus a freedom of thinking; a free self-grounding thought not dependent on any external standard. He writes in *Philosophy of Right*: "Thought which is free starts out from itself and thereupon claims to know itself as united in its innermost being with the truth."[21] A free thought, for Hegel, must be the thought of indeterminacy, a thought that doesn't yet think of itself as thought.

Politically, this leads to Hegel's rejection of a liberal notion of freedom premised on individual choice—that I am free to do as I choose—for such a freedom is dependent on what is available to be chosen. It is not therefore, autonomous from the dictates of desire or the conditions of circumstance, nature and chance. The will must be able to will something determined only by the will itself. The only thing that meets this requirement, Hegel insists, is the desire to preserve our freedom to choose; the commitment derived from free will itself is the will to be free. Freedom is thus not just free choice, but being a free will which wills the free will.[22] Paradoxically however, the free will only gains its freedom through its willingness to give up its unlimited ability to choose and let itself be determined by the character of its own freedom. Hence, a truly free will understands that freedom must be committed to engagements necessarily. The opposition between freedom and necessity dissolves. As in Kant and Rousseau, law and rights are not restrictions on freedom but something that freedom itself has determined as necessary. The rights Hegel refers to are rights to property, goods, contracts, and to oneself (to not be enslaved). We have these rights simply because we are free and this freedom must be respected. The absolute right is the right to have rights.[23]

If Hobbes and the liberal tradition in general adhere to a negative concept of freedom, in Hegel we encounter a positive freedom. Berlin defines this as the wish to be one's own master:

> I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer—deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving

goals and policies of my own and realizing them . . . . I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realize that it is not.[24]

This passage, quoted in full in order to highlight terms that aptly characterize the motivating force of freedom struggles—terms we will hear repeatedly in the chapters that follow—forms a kind of political counterpart to Hegel's philosophical reflections on freedom. In its political manifestations freedom is the hoped-for moment beyond the conclusion of an oppressive ruling apparatus or beyond the end of an ideology or thought system fought against. It is a moment or space indeterminate and pure, believed to have freely originated like Hegel's will willing something determined only by itself, uncontaminated by the external forces that it usurps. I will come back to this point later.

In Schelling's marvelous treatise on freedom, he complains that if German Idealism constructed the perfect system of freedom, it is only a formal freedom, "the real and vital conception of freedom is that it is a possibility of good and evil."[25] The propensity for evil is what makes human freedom uniquely human. Schelling states that the "self-impulsion towards good and evil" that man has in equal measure is not a bond of necessity but of freedom.[26] Freedom is not therefore an idealist sense of autonomy, of the power of the Absolute to determine itself independently, for this understanding of freedom is divorced from nature, from feeling and longing. Rather, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, freedom for Schelling is the concrete experience of tension within an individual between good and evil. He undermines an abstract philosophical notion of freedom by referring to our most concrete existential experience. Thus, like Kant, Schelling is "closest to our concrete life experience in his wildest speculations."[27]

The contradiction between freedom and necessity is thus crucial to maintain according to Schelling, since without it, he suggests, "not only philosophy but every nobler ambition of the spirit would sink to that death which is peculiar to those sciences in which that contradiction serves no function. To withdraw from the conflict by foreswearing reason looks more like flight than victory."[28] This is in keeping with Schelling's attempt to think system and freedom together, when these are generally thought to be incompatible: "every philosophy which makes claim to unity and completeness is said to end in denying freedom" he writes in the opening to the treatise.[29]

Yet there is also a sense in which freedom is a formless form in Schelling's treatise; in excess of any form. As Heidegger argues, it is an excess that Schelling's text itself mimics. We cannot grasp Schelling's treatise, he states, unless we grasp what takes it beyond itself. It opens a new realm, as Heidegger believes a philosophical work should.[30] There may be a will to system in the Western tradition, as Heidegger points out, but we could also ask if there is a will to freedom.

Emancipatory Desire

In response to Brown then, while there is certainly an idealism in the history of philosophical considerations of freedom, perhaps there has never been a pure idea of freedom. Rather we are given a history of negotiations between necessity and freedom, determinism and indeterminacy, or between concrete life experience and wildest speculation. The question remains why Brown considers a philosophical idealism troubling when reflecting on the political ramifications of freedom as practice. What is at stake for a politicized freedom in thinking about freedom philosophically? I would argue that in political discussions of freedom it is not merely a matter of being wary of philosophical abstractions but of being troubled by the negotiation outlined above of the aporetic nature of freedom—its contamination by unfreedom; by the "evil heart" of freedom, corrupt and decaying, considered deadly for the struggle.

It is the desire for freedom that is at stake in this question of the anxiety a political consideration bears toward its more philosophical counterpart. What Derrida calls "emancipatory desire" in his reading of Marx is not explicitly addressed in the analyses of freedom in the history of Western philosophy. If there is a will to system, there is perhaps also a will to freedom. Yet there is a qualitative difference between the desire for autonomous thinking that could lead us beyond what can be grasped or in the direction of new conceptualizations, and the desire for freedom from domination and exploitation. What territory would open up if we were to read together philosophical explorations of freedom—however abstract they might be—together with revolutionary expressions of an indomitable desire for freedom from oppression? Is one useful for the other? What can emancipatory desire tell us about freedom and politics?

Marx's legacy requires some brief comments here.[31] If relegated to the margins of this project, Marx remains tremendously significant for the rev-

olutionary spirit he inspired and for his audacity in pursuing a revolution that he claimed would not only emancipate the working classes but at the same time free the whole of society from exploitation, oppression, and class struggle; at least, according to Engels, who after his friend's death remarked that "this basic thought belongs solely and exclusively to Marx."[32] The contribution of Marx to postcolonial, poststructural, and feminist studies is inestimable. As Robert Young argues, for much of the twentieth century it was Marxism alone that emphasized the effects of an imperialist system and its dominating power structures and inspired the anticolonial writing responsible for sketching out "the blueprints for a future free from domination and exploitation."[33]

Unfortunately, contemporary engagement with the notion of freedom in Marx is surprisingly sparse, most likely because while Marx's work exhibits a powerful desire for freedom, he rarely discusses it explicitly. The exception is found in his discussion of the differences between Democritus and Epicurus on freedom and necessity where he exhibits, according to one critic, a certain "romanticist ebullience."[34] Marx writes of freedom as "the generic essence of all spiritual being," meaning that all aspects of spirit including law, ethics, the state, and the press, have freedom as their essence. Furthermore, their realization of freedom is the measure of their goodness. He calls attention to two external forms of an ethical failure for man to realize his free nature: autocratic government and positive religion—both represent submission of man to external forces.[35] The spirit of the text is best summed up when Marx quotes Prometheus stating to Hermes, the servant of the gods:

> Be sure of this, I would not change my state
> Of evil fortune for your servitude.
> Better to be the servant of this rock
> Than to be faithful boy to Father Zeus."[36]

The "romanticist ebullience" or emancipatory desire of revolutionary movements both fascinates and disturbs. Michel Foucault describes it well when he refers to the Tunisian students participating in revolutionary protests as "a moral force" or to the "beauty" as well as "gravity" of the revolt against the Shah of Iran. He confesses however, that the "soul of the revolt," remains an enigma for him. That this moral force can be terrifying is evident in the state forces often employed to quell it. Would any political change be accomplished without this collective emancipatory desire?

There are many who warn of the dangerous impulse to romanticize this desire however. Wole Soyinka worries about the excesses of a Marxism that he believes certain African countries have grasped all too eagerly in their fight against colonialism, wishing to guard them from "a system that speaks to the aspirations of the oppressed and in seductively universalist terms," a system that dares to be prophetic and millennialist—because within such an ethos, one can understand that the oppressed should see the path of their own salvation.[37]

Soyinka believes that it is power and its corollary, freedom, that will inevitably occupy us in the twenty-first century—on the level at which ideology has preoccupied the nations emerging from colonial domination of the twentieth century.[38] With the fall of the Berlin wall, Europe has begun to take what he calls the "unprecedented step" of unmasking ideology as the opportunistic usurper of popular will. Nothing will serve us now, he insists,

> but a clinical, unsentimental operation which takes all claims to pieces, re-examines their components, histories, records, their territorial presumptions either of this world or of the next, their material and theoretical structures, and even their self-breeding abstractionist games. Above all, face squarely the issue of power and freedom and strip them of the glad rags that have obscured these fundamental axes of human striving since the earliest known community of man began, even when such strivings lacked the ability to name themselves .[39]

What does it mean to strip freedom and power of "their glad rags" and what happens to the notion of politics when such a negative exercise has been accomplished? Where is the line to be drawn between ideology and the desire for freedom, both of which can be subject to abuse? What is left of freedom without its "glad rags"? Homi Bhabha asks, "Can there be life without transcendence? Politics without the dream of perfectibility?"[40]

There are those who argue for the necessity of this "prophetic" or "millennialist" ethos; that the revolution would not happen without it. The motivation for this project arises from the question found in this quandary: what is the relation of emancipatory desire to the politics it gives rise to and how do we negotiate the borders between desire and ideology, between yearning for freedom and the death and destruction that is committed in its name? If (a certain) Marxism provided the ethos that inspired African colonies struggling to be free from their colonizers, there are a multitude of other prophetic, utopian, and messianic inspirations—equally seductive—that empower liberation struggles the world over. What is the impact of

this desire—this call to faith, hope, and belief in a future of unqualified freedom—on political thought and practice? What do we *do* with it philosophically? Does it escape thematization?

Since the failure of countless revolutions in the twentieth century to fulfill the dreams and promises of those who inspired and nurtured revolt in the name of freedom, political thinkers have been vigorously debating the inadequacy of traditional political paradigms to account for the events of our time and the liberation struggles that continue to propel them. Emancipatory movements—from feminism, gay rights, and antiracism, to ethnic, national, and anticolonial struggles for self-determination—have acquired the most urgent voice in today's tumultuous global stage. Freedom, in this increasingly polarized world between the rich and the poor, between global capitalism and Islam, and between the friend and the enemy, has become the most ubiquitous yet the most unquestioned value.

The premise of this work is that an inquiry into the political and philosophical implications of this emancipatory desire is urgent and imperative. Soyinka is right to be worried about prophetic discourses. The desire for freedom cannot be considered ethically beyond critique. How do we distinguish among the desires for freedom expressed by an antiapartheid Mandela, by the president of the United States declaring a war against "terrorism" in the name of freedom, or by a mujahedeen fighting a war of good against evil? How do we prevent one from turning into the other?

Can emancipatory politics avoid the endless cycle of resistance and domination that almost inevitably occurs as revolutionary vanguards replace state power or political groups assert their own exclusionary ideological boundaries in the same moment that they destroy those that exclude them? This question continues to disturb any work concerned with the transformation of existing power relations that subjugate in one form or another. Contemporary liberation discourses all too often share a profoundly polarizing either/or perspective with mainstream politics, as the current war of good against evil—America, with its alleged values of freedom and equality, against the "evil-doers" believed anxious to destroy such values—aptly illustrates. It is a problem Maurice Merleau-Ponty worried about in the 1950s when discussing the impossibility of declaring oneself to be neither Communist nor anti-Communist in a postwar Europe entering a cold war era. It is a problem that Derrida's work implicitly and explicitly addresses: how to recognize the dangers of naming, of subsuming difference under the self-same, of reducing

or suturing that which cannot be reduced or sutured. Although critiques of a political practice founded on identity claims abound, they seem unable to withstand the pressure of the tidal wave of increasing political demands—accompanied by escalating violence—formulated in the name of identity.[41] How do we deal with the question of identifications rooted firmly on the ground of claiming subject status when such status was unattainable before? The experience of invisibility should not be ignored, yet at the same time, emancipatory political practices cannot continue to validate experience at the expense of critical reflection. One of the central concerns of this project is to explore the origins of a politics founded on identity—an "egological" politics, as Derrida would put it—and how this discourse constitutes, and is constituted by, emancipatory desire. If we were to throw into question such an egological politics, what would happen to our idea of freedom?

The Phenomenological Tradition

Derrida states that he prefers to avoid speaking of the freedom of the subject; nevertheless, he fights for freedoms. If he is wary of the term *freedom*, he confesses, it is not due to a belief in determinism but because this term is often charged with metaphysical presuppositions that endow the subject with sovereignty. How can one name a freedom other than that which has been named in philosophy as the sovereign power of the subject, the independence of one's conscience, the will of the cogito? "It is a difficult problem," Derrida states, "I am always afraid" of reconstituting this philosophical discourse when naming freedom. "It has often happened, in recent years, when I have had to give a name to things of this order—the 'free,' the incalculable, the unforeseeable, the undecidable, the event, the arrival, the other—that I speak of 'what comes.' "[42] An *imprévisible liberté*—an unforeseeable or unpredictable freedom—is the cautious term Derrida uses to speak of what he wishes to avoid speaking about.

My attraction to twentieth-century French philosophers of the phenomenological, existential, and poststructuralist traditions has to do with the recognition of political life as contingent, indeterminate, and fundamentally ambiguous. In the following chapters I seek to demonstrate how these traditions have contributed to a rethinking of politics that is necessary if we are to avoid the polarizing, teleological practices that end in exclusions and sometimes violence. While many complain that Merleau-Ponty and above all, Derrida, have nothing to contribute to political thought and

practice, I will argue that on the contrary, they reveal what is problematic about promoting a politics of regulative principles by which to map out a future free of conflict and injustice.[43] These authors have never failed to address the most pressing political questions of their time and highlight the fact that the political must signify that which must remain open to question: the inexhaustible encounters between beings on this planet and the infinite numbers of unpredictable solutions required to mediate them.

My concern is with the legacy of the "blueprints" for a future free from domination that Young believes Marx helped to inspire. I seek to demonstrate, by exploring the writings of several revolutionary actors of the 1960s and 1970s that such a blueprint arises in conjunction with French existentialism, arguably a foundational moment for emancipatory discourses of the late twentieth century. Central to both these writings and the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is the assumption of humanism and the sovereignty (despite certain instances of ambiguity) of consciousness or subjectivity. Freedom, for Sartre and Beauvoir, is shown to be synonymous with full humanity, authentic consciousness, and the uninhibited ability, or even necessity, to choose. In the social movements that followed on the heels of the phenomenon called existentialism, this has translated into self-determination, the right to autonomy, and the claim to truth based on identity.

One of the most pivotal transformations of thought initiated by the convergence of poststructuralism in response to the humanism of existentialism and phenomenology, with challenges to colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, regards the status of the subject. No consideration of freedom and politics in the twentieth century could ignore the remarkable effects of this critical overhaul of Western philosophy's coddled offspring. Many have commented in frustration on the fact that this overhaul began just as subjugated peoples all over the world started demanding a subject status for themselves. From this vantage point, theoretical reflections on the unstable nature of the subject appear to be a conspiracy to thwart the liberation of the oppressed. We could turn this around to suggest that precisely at the moment when revolutionary movements expressed themselves in terms of fixed subject positions and rigid identifications, a critique of the subject became inevitable and necessary. The demand for inclusion tends to go hand in hand with exclusion. Consequently, the critique of subjectivity has risen out of the very center of claims to it.

Foucault's work serves as a crucial juncture in this critique, throwing into question the familiar sense of power and the individual's relation

to it, found in the revolutionary movements of his time. He writes of a subject, torn from itself, inscribed by a power that he describes as a multiplicity of force relations that constitute their own organization. Power is not simply a relation between partners, individual or collective, but a way in which certain actions modify others. It requires that the one over whom power is exercised be recognized as a person who acts, and that in this relationship of power, a whole field of possible inventions and responses may open up. Thus, for Foucault, both the subject and power are removed from their static meanings. He reminds us that the term *subject* signifies both to be subject to someone else by control and to be tied to one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. These meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.[44]

Derrida remarks that the problematic of the subject is its current dogmatic effect of suturing identity to self. He seeks to deflect the question of the end or death of the subject that some have proclaimed and/or attributed to him, by asking about its political status. How can we think of a subject as "besieged" by difference; as a heterogeneous concept that exceeds what we can say about it yet requires that we say something, that something about the subject is "calculable?" For while the subject is never one with itself, it remains necessary to speak of it, for human rights and ethics. The supplementarity of the concept does not negate the necessity of its use. Unity, gathering, and configuration are as necessary as multiplicity and disassociation. There is no avoiding the danger of embracing both of these imperatives.

It is thus the notion of the subject as excessive to itself, different from itself, that is the condition of possibility for political action for these thinkers. Derrida states that the only way to take responsibility and make political decisions is to realize the impossibility of being one with oneself.[45] Foucault argues that we need to alter our goal of *discovering* what we are to *refusing* what we are, to liberate us from the kind of individuality that has been imposed on us by the state.[46]

Both Derrida and Foucault have been accused of paralyzing the political actor: Derrida, for undermining the will and agency of the subject; Foucault for leaving little room for resistance against an ubiquitous and seemingly monolithic power. Along with other French philosophers, they are often regarded as having removed the foundations on which a defense of civil liberties can be based. The radical questioning of a unitary subject has clearly thrown into confusion the assurances of a liberty based on the claim of a right to subjectivity. But efforts to subvert the traditional view of

the autonomous subject have also been made by those interested in reversing the effacement of their own subject status, and these perspectives have generated some remarkable debates in what has become an enormous body of scholarship. While I only touch on these debates here, it is important to recognize the forceful impact this field has had on ideas concerning a political praxis with emancipatory goals.

In the ongoing feminist discussion of political agency for example, a problematic arises from the challenge of claiming a subjectivity for women that is no longer fixed or unitary but capable of addressing difference. As Peggy Kamuf puts it, feminist theory wishes to preserve a certain form of the subject, one that is "relativized, particularized and differentiated," but a subject nonetheless that reverses the effacement of feminine difference in Descartes's cogito or Foucauldian power.[47] There is no agreement, however, on how one can accomplish this preservation. Some argue for the use of an essentialist subject as a strategy only, as Kelly Oliver does when she proposes the notion of a "fragmented" subject. Others, such as Seyla Benhabib, demand a "regulative ideal" for the selfhood and subjectivity of woman, for how else can one act toward political ends?

This work is preoccupied with this relationship between freedom and the subject. If emancipatory politics is wholly invested in autonomy, agency, and empowerment—all terms that take for granted a certain subject, sometimes individual, sometimes collective—how must our political practices change with the acknowledgement that a subject is not self-identical? This question has posed serious issues for liberation discourses, most evident in the proliferation of writings by feminists on the question of agency and in the extreme wariness on the part of those thinking and practicing a liberation philosophy toward theories perceived to be undermining such agency; loosely labeled postmodernism, poststructuralism, or the postcolonial thinkers "contaminated" by such discourses. For those caught up in the struggle for liberation from colonization, imperialism, and authoritative and totalitarian regimes, there is no hesitation to speak of freedom—a freedom unabashedly sought in the name of an autonomous subjectivity.

This raises a crucial question for this study, one that has been asked many times before: is there a point at which one must leap from theory to practice? Is Gayatri Spivak right when she states that at a certain moment, one simply "takes sides" without creating divisions in a fully mobilized unity?[48] The following chapters are haunted by this question and the dichotomy it assumes between faith and skepticism. If it is the desire for a

future free from oppression that motivates revolutionary action, is theoretical skepticism disabling? In this question rests the entire debate between Latin American liberation philosophy and what it refers to as postmodernism, or between feminist identity politics and French poststructuralism. In short, between liberation struggles and political thought. Yet this is far too glib a distinction to make. The French philosophers I have chosen to write about were active in the political realm to varying degrees, all publicly concerned with emancipatory politics of one form or another. Where does theory end and practice begin? What does the *experience* of oppression and liberation contribute to a discussion of politics?

Overview

This question is uniquely suited to an exploration of the work of the French existentialists, Sartre and Beauvoir. Why begin here? One could just as easily begin with Hegel's dialectics or Heidegger's understanding of freedom, both of which are necessary precursors to Sartre. Yet Sartre and Beauvoir exerted a tremendous influence on liberation discourses after World War II—influences that are often forgotten—and became renowned, if not always respected, public intellectuals. The roots of this phenomenon are what concern me in my first chapter. I discuss the existentialist notions of absolute freedom, action and *engagement* elaborated during and after World War II. Sartre and Beauvoir attempted to escape the determinism they perceived in Marxism's emphasis on the objective conditions of reality, a determinism they thought occluded human freedom. At the heart of existential philosophy is an absolute freedom based on the human subject's liberty to choose absolutely, in any given situation. I describe what this means for Sartre's politics, and the criticisms both Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty level at him for his inattention to *la force des choses*, the force of circumstance. Beauvoir, in particular, in *The Second Sex*, demonstrates precisely what situated existence means by meticulously describing the experience of being a woman. While Sartre pays greater attention to historical circumstance later in life, particularly the exploitation of colonization, I argue that even in later works, his ideas on freedom remain largely unchanged, hinged on a self/other relation that arises out of, and is resolved by, conflict.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the absolute freedom that Sartre proposes leads to a Manichean model of political action that he rejects as too prescriptive. For Merleau-Ponty, as for Beauvoir, political action must open

the future rather than provide solutions; caught up as it is in the contingent present, the political must remain undecidable, ambiguous. Freedom is correspondingly contingent; a paradox, for one is simultaneously free and not free, both born *of* the world and *in* the world. An exchange of letters between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in 1953 details the disagreement between them on their involvement in politics and on the pressing questions of their time concerning Communism and the developing cold war. The bitter exchange of accusations also serves as an apt point of departure for questioning the relationship between politics and freedom. What does it mean to act in the name of liberty? What is this freedom that we act in the name of? What is this politics that constitutes the emancipatory act? How can political action accomplish freedom, if this is possible?

Merleau-Ponty's disagreement with Sartre quite clearly reveals him to anticipate Derrida's work on the undecidability of politics, which I address in a later chapter. First, in chapter two, I turn to several liberation discourses that converged on the international scene in the 1960s and 1970s, which display a remarkable faithfulness to several existential tenets. I describe a revolutionary or political ethos particular to the writings of various political actors and revolutionary leaders of that time period, namely from the movements of anticolonialism in North Africa, early "second wave" American feminism, and South African black consciousness. While the historical circumstances of these struggles vary widely, they share certain presuppositions: primarily, that freedom means participating in full humanity; that such a complete existence requires a newly awakened "authentic" consciousness; that working for political transformation toward that end requires, even if only momentarily, an essentialist discourse in the name of identity, solidarity, and a teleological project. Above all, this revolutionary ethos evokes an imaginary realm fueled by emancipatory desire, in which the hope for a future free from oppression and domination, and the faith or belief in its eventual coming, is expected to take precedence over any critical reflection that threatens it.

In the third chapter I turn to the work of Foucault, who criticizes the philosophers of *engagement,* along with Marx, for relying on a humanist subject and a notion of repressive power that relegates freedom to some nebulous region beyond the borders of power. Foucault's elaborate conceptualization of "force relations" or micropower structures that undermine the sovereignty model of power as domination, turns liberation on its head. As he demonstrates in his famous example of Western culture's incitement

to discourse on all matters of sexuality, Foucault's suspicion of liberation leads him to a brilliant critique of any simple dichotomy between power and freedom and the dream of a utopian liberation that could arise from it.

Yet for all his theoretical skepticism, Foucault is attracted to the anti-colonial struggles he witnesses on the streets of Tunisia and Iran. Drawn by the radical violence of the student protests, which exhibit an intensity he describes as "a kind of moral force," Foucault appears baffled by the desire of the protesters to sacrifice themselves in the fight for freedom without any ambition for power or profit. What part does this emancipatory desire play in the drama of the revolution and can Foucault's theory of power and skepticism toward liberation account for it? I conclude that, in the end, Foucault appears to argue in theory for a skeptical approach that he does not uphold in practice. When faced with the power of exploitive regimes, and the "moral force" of the fight for freedom, Foucault's political stance is one that assumes the very repressive power he repudiates.

In the latter part of this chapter, I discuss the implications of this inconsistency for Foucault's ideas on freedom. With the help of John Rajchman's and Thomas Dumm's studies of freedom in Foucault, I point out the usefulness of this critique for contemporary political resistance movements. The problematic that remains for Foucault is that without being able to account for dominating power in situations of repressive or colonial regimes, his critique of liberation falls flat. Power from the perspective of the Tunisian Marxist student appears to be something qualitatively different from the power of discourses on sex. Furthermore, we must ask what this suggests about the difference between politics and philosophy, or action and reflection, since what appears strange and wonderful to him is the lack of ambiguity in the force of revolutionary protests. What can this mean for the possibility of liberation? What can Foucault's critique contribute to the discussion and practice of emancipatory politics?

Derrida states that we should not renounce emancipatory desire, but insist on it as a condition for a new concept of the political. In the fourth chapter I address this statement, with its discomfort with a teleological or utopian sense of history, yet its attempt to think the political as affirmative, as a promise that remains a promise, always *á-venir*. Derrida refers to this as a messianicity without messianism—a "quasi-messianism" that does not constitute a utopian dream that will arrive at the end of the revolution, but an unknowable event that we cannot expect but that will come, that is always coming. It speaks of a certain spirit of Marx that renders his writings

urgent for today, Derrida writes: urgent for a reconceptualization of politics that will depend at every moment on new assessments of singular situations for which there are no preexisting criteria or solutions. Without denying the emancipatory desire that he reads in Marx, Derrida writes of his wariness of the term *liberté*. Yet his insistence on the inherent duplicity of concepts suggests that liberation remains a useful concept despite, or because of, this wariness.

Many argue, however, that despite Derrida's more recent intentions, his work remains impotent for political action, decision, and judgment. It is necessary to show that what has become known as deconstruction, has always/already been thoroughly invested in politics. I use the example of identity, its perpetual deconstruction or lack of self-sameness, to demonstrate the radical intervention Derrida's work has provided for emancipatory discourses that slip all too easily into polarized friend/enemy distinctions.

Through the lens of Derrida's notions of a democracy to come and messianicity without messianism, I explore the possibility of thinking emancipatory politics otherwise—of reinventing revolution. In my final chapter I turn to a unique discourse on liberation that has arisen from the experience of colonization and repressive governments and a long history of political resistance against this experience. The Zapatista movement, an organization of indigenous communities fighting to end centuries of dominance and social injustice in Mexico, is said to be striving to revolutionize the very concept of revolution. The writings of the Zapatista spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, poignantly evoke a desire for liberation not pinned on the hope of utopian solutions, but one that it could be argued using the language of Derrida, remains á-venir; an expectation irreducible to knowledge that leads one to hope in a political transformation that affirms a promise as promise, and not as teleological design. It is hoped that such a revised version of political resistance will remain open to the future, able to face the inevitable power relations that arise in that future, and that render freedom always compromised by its other. From this point of view, one can insist on an emancipatory desire that renews demands for justice and for a political commitment that begins anew every day, everywhere.