

On Racial Frontiers

*The New Culture of Frederick Douglass,
Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley*

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction: the contemporary rear-view mirror	1
1 Interraciality in historical context: return of the repressed	12
2 Frederick Douglass as integrative ancestor: the consequences of interracial co-creation	54
“A sort of half-way place”: Douglass as biracial “black culture hero”	54
“Antagonistic cooperation” and “redeemable ideals” in Douglass’ July 5 Speech	79
Douglass’ interracial marriage as “mediatory symbol”	94
3 Invisible community: Ralph Ellison’s vision of a multiracial “ideal democracy”	114
4 Bob Marley’s Zion: a transracial “Blackman Redemption”	148
Roots	148
Structure	167
Fruits	182
Legacy	212
Afterthoughts: “integrative ancestors” for the future	221
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	227
<i>Notes</i>	229
<i>Select bibliography</i>	304
<i>Index</i>	319

Illustrations

1	The Douglass years: daguerrotype of Douglass at age twenty-five Courtesy Gregory French	page 56
2	Cazenovia Fugitive Slave Law Convention (1850) Courtesy Madison Country Historical Society, Oneida, New York	66
3	Frontpiece for “Autographs for Freedom” Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site	69
4	Helen Pitts Douglas, at about age forty-five Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site	100
5	Douglass with two white feminists in 1884 Still from video <i>When the Lion Wrote History</i>	101
6	Douglass and Helen Pitts at Niagara Falls, 1884 Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture	102
7	Wood engraving of Douglass, <i>Harper’s Weekly</i> (1883) Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian	107
8	Ralph Ellison with his wife Fanny Courtesy Library of Congress	121
9	Marcus Garvey in Victorian imperial headdress Still from <i>Time Will Tell</i> (Island Films)	157
10	Haile Selassie at the United Nations, October 4, 1963 Courtesy the United Nations, Media Division	192
11	Marley in 1976 at Jamaican home under Selassie poster Photo by Kim Gottlieb – Courtesy Roger Steffens Marley Archives	194
12	Marley in San Diego on the 1979 <i>Survival</i> tour Photo by Roger Steffens, Courtesy Bob Marley Archives	199
13	Marley at 1978 “One Love/Peace Concert” with Michael Manley and Edward Seaga Still from <i>The Bob Marley Story</i> (Island Films)	211

4 Bob Marley's Zion: a trans-racial "Blackman Redemption"

My father was a white and my mother black, you know. Them call me half-caste, or whatever. Well, me don't dip on nobody's side. Me don't dip on the black man's side nor the white man's side. Me dip on God's side, the one who create me and cause me to come from black and white, who give me this talent. (Bob Marley, 1975)

ROOTS

Overview: "come we a chant down babylon one more time"

Bob Marley is probably the most enduringly influential popular songwriter of the twentieth century, worldwide. He is also one of the most beloved songwriters among mass audiences: two decades after his death, demand for Marley as a *product* in all shapes and forms is accelerating. There are hundreds of millions of copies of his albums in circulation around the world. And Marley's face has taken on an iconic status not unlike a Buddha or the Virgin Mary. Travelers sight Marley's name and image in the most remote corners of the earth, on everything from stained glass to shoelaces, "from Peru to Poland, Tokyo to Timbuktu, the top of the Himalayas to the bottom of the Grand Canyon," as Roger Steffens writes.¹

The distance between Marley's Jamaican roots and his global reception is vast. This chapter is about the movement from the roots to the fruits, as it were. Marley's music is deeply embedded in Jamaican cultural traditions and political movements, and cannot be fully understood apart from that context. Yet I want to emphasize Marley as a cultural phenomenon who transcended "racial" and national boundaries. Marley lived for extended periods of time in the United States and Europe, toured "every shore," as he put it, and viewed himself as both Jamaican *and* a world citizen. He was a missionary for a form of personal and collective identity

he called *Rasta* – a word that both signified on a history of racial oppression, and yet pointed to a definition of community beyond the language of race.

We can glimpse how far Marley traveled from his roots by comparing his “One Love” ideal to the character “Ras the Exhorter” in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s portrayal of Ras as a leader of a group of racialists who hate white people so intensely they would “denounce the white meat of a roasted chicken,” is a parody of Caribbean-born, Marcus Garvey-style black nationalists. Yet it is also a fair approximation of the attitudes of many early Rastafarians – the group or movement in which Marley was based. The Rastas were and are rooted in Garvey’s black nationalism, and in an older tradition of “Africanized” Christianity known as Ethiopianism. This tradition often acted as “a voice in the wilderness” calling for, or warning of, a “racial armageddon.”² When in Ellison’s novel “Ras the *Exhorter*” metamorphosizes into “Ras the *Destroyer*,” we are witnessing a transformation from the “racialized Christianity” of Ethiopianism to the anticolonial resistance Marley would popularize.

Early Rastas adapted the battle cry of anticolonial rebels in Kenya: “Death to the white oppressor.” By 1960 this had evolved to “death to black and white oppressors,” but a certain binary racialism has persisted in Rastafarian thought. In opposition to a white supremacist thesis, Rastas voiced a “black supremacy” antithesis. It is only to a limited degree that many Jamaican Rastas have moved beyond this binary mindset.³ One could say that the Rasta belief in a black deity is closely tied to a mythologized “white oppressor,” much as Afro-American thought has centered on a despised/chosen coupling. The proof of being chosen is in the persistence of being despised, and the perfect black father is the ultimate refutation of an oppressive white “other” (or imperfect white father, in Marley’s case).

Given the similarity of certain strains of Rastafarian thought to the “white man is the devil” racial mythology of Black Muslims, there is a paradox in Marley’s role as spokesman for the “One Love” variant of Rastafarianism. I wish to explore some ironies of Marley’s role as a corporate-sponsored “biracial black culture hero” who popularized a symbolic *African Zion*. Marley revisioned Judeo-Christian scripture (especially the Exodus story) in order to balance the concerns of black liberation and multiracial redemption, within the context of his international audience. The resulting synthesis voiced a moral philosophy interpreted by much of Marley’s audience as a sort of multiracial secular church.

As a means of examining Marley’s role as a co-creator of the transracial new culture which I am mapping in this book, I want to think about

Marley's relationship to his audience in several ways. What is the relationship between the messianic mindset of Jamaicans, which many observers have noted, and the international consumption of Marley as the voice of this messianic/millennial tradition? What do we make of the significance of Marley's "Exodus," for a global culture? Can we draw any conclusions about the expectations that this audience projected on to Marley himself?⁴

Trying to talk about Bob Marley is "like trying to take a sip from the ocean," an Ethiopian Orthodox archbishop said at his funeral in 1981. Marley is such a protean character, both as a songwriter, and as a global icon widely seen as a prophetic figure, that I am conscious of the need to be cautious about exploring a part of that "ocean," and claiming that what I have encountered is representative of the whole.⁵

One obstacle for a writer seeking to get a handle on Marley is the sheer immensity of his songbook, "an embarrassment of riches," as one critic put it. These songs "embarrass" by their scope, variety, creativity, and social vision. Critical assessments of artistic merit are notoriously subjective, but Roger Steffens' statement that Marley "had a sense of melody that is unmatched in the history of modern music" is a common perception.⁶

A different obstacle is the extent to which Marley's skills as a songwriter are linked with a perceived status as a prophet. Many assessments of Marley's stature as an artist are inseparable from his parallel reputation as a visionary. Steffens, curator of the Bob Marley archives in Los Angeles, calls Marley's corpus "a legacy of songs unsurpassed in modern music history, the true 'new' psalms." Carlos Santana makes the claim for Marley that "as we enter the new millennium, his songs will be hymns and anthems that people can use to build a new world."⁷ I will later discuss what it means to claim for Marley's songs a status as "hymns" or "new psalms." For now I want to merely note that a wide range of people project quasi-messianic qualities on to Marley, much as they have done for Martin Luther King and other "black culture heroes."

There is also the problem of a lack of scholarly precedents. A torrent of books and articles about Marley and the Rastafarians flew off the presses in the years just before and after his death. But although numerous books on Rastafarianism have appeared which try to place Marley within broader social, religious, and historical currents, little of the work on Marley himself has been of a critical nature. Through the 1980s, most writing on Marley has been either adulatory myth-making, or impressionistic popular journalism. However, a wealth of new source material has appeared in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of Marley's birth on February 6, 1995.⁸ And academic scholars have begun to historicize Marley and to

subject his work to critical analysis. Recent works by scholars such as Barry Chevannes, Carolyn Cooper, Richard D. E. Burton, John Homiak, Carole Yawney, Jack Johnson-Hill, and the many authors in the ground-breaking anthology *Chanting Down Babylon* have integrated studies of Rastafarianism, Marley, and Jamaican popular culture into anthropology, literary studies, social ethics, and religious studies.⁹

In describing the *movement* of Marley and his music, *from* Jamaica and *toward* a global audience, I have relied on several forms of ethnographic research. My first two visits to Jamaica in 1987 and 1988 helped me to see Marley's cultural roots. Since then, friends who are radio DJs have supplied me with hundreds of tapes, often filled with singles they brought back from Jamaica. This has allowed me to listen in on contemporary "reggae dancehall" – and not least, to Marley's still pervasive influence in this domain. I have also listened to Jamaican radio shows in which various Rasta "sects" debate their theological differences, compare their attitudes towards Marley, and ponder the mystery of reggae's predominantly nonblack audience. My understanding of reggae's American audience has benefited from the experience of managing a group during the 1980s which sometimes performed on the bill with touring reggae bands. I have since engaged in research on reggae's global audience through the Internet discussion group rec.music.reggae (RMR). This "chat room" has hundreds of participants from around the world, most of them musicians, DJs, and promoters. The "reasonings" on this group have provided many insights into the tensions that still exist over "racial" and transracial interpretations of Marley's vision, in particular, and Rasta-influenced reggae, in general.

This chapter grew out of a longer project in which I trace the uses of references to Ethiopia in the Bible as a strategy for racial equality, from 1700 to the present. Marley is the end point of my study of Ethiopianism. Here, more than elsewhere in this book, I am engaging cultural traditions that have developed a parallel form of "critical theory" which is largely outside of, and overtly hostile to, European critical traditions. My effort has been, as far as possible, to try to engage this postcolonial, Afro-Christian critique in a way that takes seriously its own internal logic.

I have chosen a line from Marley's song "Chant Down Babylon" as a subtitle to this section, to give readers who may have little or no familiarity with Rastafarianism, a glimpse of the "internal logic" of this worldview. Jack Johnson-Hill has defined *Babylon*, in the sense used by Rastas, as "*an artificial affluent society of self-absorbed individuals who worship idols and live decadent life-styles at the expense of the poor.*"¹⁰ At the core of the Rastafarian worldview, as popularized by Marley, is both a critique of the "Babylon System," and the articulation of a replacement worldview. I would point

to three main features in the Rasta alternative to the decadence of Babylonian life-styles:

- (1) a sustainable life-style (living within the earth's limits);
- (2) a postwhite supremacy worldview;
- (3) "I and I" consciousness (commonly, I & I). This concept differentiates between an external deity and a "God within."

Those who have experienced "I-sight" reject a human/divine binary. Thus, "I & I" connotes not only a unity between human beings and their "God within," but also a unity with other human beings who have awakened to their "higher consciousness." This is not a merely spiritual notion which leads Rastas to wait for divine intervention, however. The implications of "I & I" thinking are that each individual is responsible for contributing to collective social transformation: "every man to his works," as Michael Rose sings (in "Seeing Blind" [1997]).

In the line from Marley's song, "Come we a chant down Babylon one more time," we see several indications of this unity consciousness. First, the singer designates "come we" – it is a collective endeavor. Second, the act of "Chanting Down Babylon" is a ritual act engaged in by this collective, through the use of what Rastas conceive of as "Word/Sound/Power." The roots of this concept are in the Old Testament story of Israelites using a ritual blowing of horns, and a great shout, to bring down the walls of Jericho, while conquering the Promised Land. Third, the line "one more time" indicates a *process*. Chanting down the "walls of Babylon," or overcoming "mental slavery," in Marley's words, is an ongoing process. It may not be finished in our lifetime, but participants seek to forward the momentum to the next generation. It is the collective, cross-generational participation in this ritual which lends it strength and momentum, and the hope of fulfillment. The collective comes together one more time to "Chant Down Babylon" because they believe that their actions have a cumulative impact. (In fact there have been hundreds of songs released with similar titles, or variations on the theme of "Chant Down Babylon.") And in this worldview articulated by Marley and the Rastas, it is music which provides the baseline to this collective Word/Sound/Power. "Music is the key" to chanting down Babylon, Marley sings, and elsewhere: "We free the people with music." (I would encourage readers to listen to Marley's music as they read this chapter, especially the album *Survival*. His vision cannot be understood in full by merely quoting his lyrics, as I do in these pages.)

My overall goal is to sketch how the deep currents which fed Marley's artistic and political vision, such as Judeo-Christian scripture, and post-colonialism, were reformulated by Marley, and flowed back to an interna-

tional audience in the form of a symbolic African "Zion" which was open to both racialized and transracial readings. The cornerstone of my analysis will be a study of how Marley used the Bible in his masterpiece, *Survival*, to articulate his vision of an imagined community in which "black liberation" and "multiracial redemption" could coexist.

A personal note on the study of religious expression

I could not write an honest assessment of Marley's use of Biblical themes without offering some personal comment on my relation to Biblical study, and the resistances this subject matter is likely to arouse among many in my audience. The reasons for and consequences of this hostility towards or condescension regarding religious expression in public discourse have been made clear by scholars such as Stephen Carter and Jenny Franchot.¹¹ While I find much of their critique compelling, I must also say that I fully understand the suspicion of many of my peers towards anything associated with Christianity, as I have long shared those suspicions of fundamentalisms.

I was raised in a fundamentalist home, and attended the Church of Christ for my first eighteen years. After leaving home, I quit going to church. I had read the Bible often as a youth, but now I put the Bible aside and rarely looked at it for the next fifteen years. Christianity carried the baggage of all that I disliked about American political/religious culture: a certain self-righteous insularity, and, too often, a spirit of intolerance. The church in which I was raised forbade musical instruments and dance. It prayed to a "God above" but was suspicious of the "God within."¹² The branch of this tradition to which I was exposed seemed Eurocentric, ahistorical, uncritical of its textual foundations, and disconnected from the body.

By the late 1970s, I had been exposed to enough alternative traditions to know that my own experience was not necessarily normative. I had traveled in Mexico, witnessed Native American forms of spirituality in the American Southwest, and studied under Vine DeLoria, Jr., author of *God is Red*. I became aware that the Bible (and more generally sacred scriptures of several varieties) could be used to support social justice within multiethnic contexts, as with Latin American "liberation theology." But it was only after my work in the music business had brought me to Jamaica in 1987 and 1988 that I renewed my interest in Judeo-Christian scriptural traditions. Here I encountered Rastafarian-influenced reggae singers and street folk who quoted the Bible incessantly.¹³ Indeed, Rastafarian culture had a distinctly Old Testament feel to me, triggering many associations with the Bible stories of my youth. But the Bible was

being used by these dissenters in a very different way than the tradition I had known. They used the Bible to argue for political freedom; with an explicitly black and secondarily multiracial emphasis. Ethiopia was their Zion, and their God was “a living man,” and a black or brown man, at that – which they treated as a numinous “God within.”¹⁴

Furthermore, the spiritual concerns of these Jamaicans and their worldwide fans coexisted with a very explicit sexuality. This package of Biblical lyrics, political protest, sensual riddims (bass-centered Afro-Caribbean rhythms), and sexuality engaged me. As I continued to listen to Bible-influenced reggae music, I began to look up the scriptural references that I constantly heard. The Rastafarian dogma that Haile Selassie, late emperor of Ethiopia, was the contemporary reincarnation of Christ seemed irrational to me. But then, it didn’t seem any more illogical than Christian beliefs in the historical Jesus as the perfect son of God. Both of these belief systems were speculative projections, from a psycho-historical perspective. But both religious mythologies also expressed psychological and cultural “truths” about transformation and redemption that could not be contained in rational language.¹⁵

In a sense, it was the black man who took me back to church: not to an institution, but to study of the scriptural cornerstone of Judeo-Christian culture. Black people sang my roots back to me in a new voice, using the same scriptures, but applying a radically different interpretation. The Rastafarian variant of Christianity had roots in an Ethiopian church which had maintained almost 2,000 years of independence from “Western” forms of Christianity. Rasta believed Biblical assertions that prophecy was an ongoing process. Rasta articulated a critical theory within an artistic vision that applied Enlightenment philosophy to the multiracial realities of the postcolonial world.¹⁶ In the hands of these latter-day prophets, the Bible was converted into a tool for black liberation as well as multiracial redemption.

It was only this “black” and music-based reading of the Bible that inspired me to use the tools I had acquired in academia to investigate scriptural traditions. The further I explored this domain, the more I became convinced that religious expression is truly “the stone that the builder rejected” when it comes to understanding interracial communication in a historical context.

Marcus Garvey as Rasta’s patron saint: ironic contradictions

During the second decade of the twentieth century, Marcus Garvey was already quoting Psalms 68:31 – “Ethiopia will soon stretch forth her

hands unto God" – in the service of his "back to Africa" movement. Garvey's call for people of the African diaspora to look at God "through the eyes of Ethiopia" referenced a thoroughly invented Ethiopia, just as the Amharas, the ruling class of Ethiopia, had invented a mythology of Solomonic descent in order to justify their imperial ambitions.¹⁷ Garvey's blend of Ethiopianism and black nationalism would become an ideological cornerstone of the Rastafarians, who would in turn spread this vision worldwide through reggae music.

"Jamaica's reggae music exhibits an amazing fixation with the memory of Garvey," observes Robert Hill. According to Leonard Barrett, "in the pantheon of Rastafarians, Marcus Garvey is second only to Haile Selassie."¹⁸ The importance of Marcus Garvey as an ideological father to Rastafarians is evident in many ways, from the music of Burning Spear to the iconic images of Garvey at many reggae concerts. On Bob Marley's 1979 masterpiece *Survival*, the album jacket featured a drawing of the interior of a slave ship, its human cargo packed like so many sardines. The accompanying quote from Garvey reads: "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."

Marley's use of this quote (and reggae's Garvey fixation) is ironic, given Garvey's ahistorical view of Africa. I want to give an overview of Garvey's thought that illustrates why he is a paradoxical choice as patron saint for Marley-era Rastafarian reggae. I will focus in particular on two of his attitudes that are relevant for my treatment of Marley as a "biracial black culture hero": first, his conflicted attitudes towards Ethiopia, beginning with an uncritical romanticization and ending with contempt for Haile Selassie; and second, his pathological hatred of mulattos and race-mixing.

Garvey has been characterized as a fascist or proto-fascist by scholars such as Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Clarence Walker, and C. L. R. James. Garvey himself told J. A. Rogers that "We were the first Fascists . . . Mussolini copied our Fascism." I point this out because I want to stress that my own criticisms of Garvey are not driven by an ideological agenda, or by an urge to "tear down" an icon of "black liberation." However, one does not have to dig far into the historical record to realize that the revival of interest in Garvey, both among Rastafarians and during the "black power" phase of the Civil Rights movement, has been "characterized by a blindness to his personal faults and ideological shortcomings," as Moses writes.¹⁹ These shortcomings include persistent anti-Semitism, a pathological hatred of race-mixing, and a dictatorial and culturally Eurocentric worldview.

I feel reluctant to criticize this icon, because I have seen the veneration many Jamaicans feel for Garvey. In Jamaica Garvey is both a folk hero and

official “National Hero.”²⁰ When I visited for the first time in August 1987, Jamaica was celebrating its twenty-fifth year of independence and the hundredth anniversary of Garvey’s birth. Garvey was everywhere: from the face of Jamaica’s 50 cent coin to a thirty-foot portrait that was a backdrop to the stage at Sunsplash – Jamaica’s international reggae festival. The edge of the stage had been designed to resemble one of Garvey’s “Black Star Line” ships. In the spirit of cross-cultural exploration, I acquired a T-shirt with Garvey’s image. This inspired a great deal of positive feedback from the locals, who expressed their joy that someone from “foreign,” and especially a white man, would show a gesture of respect for their national hero.

It was not until several years later, while reading scholars of Caribbean culture such as James and historians of black nationalism such as Moses, that it became evident how selective was the collective memory of Garvey among Pan-Africanists in general and Rastafarians in particular. Most of those invoking his name seemed to have very little idea of what Garvey actually stood for, and what he fought against.

On the plus side, respect is due to Garvey for raising the self-esteem of millions in the African diaspora. Garvey can be credited with forging unprecedented links among the international black intelligentsia, not only in North America and the Caribbean but also in Latin America, England, and West Africa. The efforts of Garvey and his cohorts led to a new interest in “African foundations,” which has found expression above all within forums of artistic expression. Garvey has also been an impetus behind various schools of Pan-African scholarship and quasi-scholarship, including (but not limited to) Afrocentrism.²¹

On the down side, Garvey popularized a “race pride” that was xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and dismissive of the “lessons of history” other than a need for self-mythologization. Walker calls Garvey a “charlatan.” Aside from his “reactionary” ideology and messianic delusions, his business ventures alone justify this charge. Garvey’s Black Star Line, his “Achilles heel,” has ironically remained “one of the most enduring symbols of Garveyism, both in Jamaica and West Africa,” Derek Bishton writes.²² The Black Star Line, which was supposed to transport blacks “back to Africa,” was a boondoggle, yet the concept had such an appeal that Kwame Nkrumah named Ghana’s state shipping line after it. Like many “Back to Africa” confidence men who preceded him, Garvey never set foot in Africa. But he did raise millions of dollars from poor black people who bought his dream of a black promised land. Their money sank: none of the ships Garvey bought, beginning with the *Frederick Douglass* in 1920, was ever sea-worthy. The Black Star Line symbolized the unbridgeable gap between the ideals and the practice of Ethiopianism in this era.



9 Marcus Garvey, the “patron saint” of Rastafarians, in full Victorian regalia.

In one area, at least, Garvey's success is undebatable: he was a stupendously successful publicist and speaker. His public posture lacked racial ambiguity, and this seems to have been “giving the people what they want.” Like Alexander Crummell (who was also Du Bois' early mentor), Garvey was “conservative on every conceivable issue, save equal rights for black[s].” Although the embrace of Garvey by later black nationalists and Rastafarians has saddled him with a reputation as a radical, his conservatism was in fact so extreme that the Klan found in him “an answer to their prayers,” as Clarence Walker puts it.²³

Many writers have accepted much of Garvey's myth-making at face value. For instance, contemporary writers still often repeat the legend that Garvey was a hero of poor black people who rose up from the bottom of Jamaican society to become an international statesman. Yet Garvey was the “son of a fairly prosperous stonemason,” Wilson Moses points out, had extensive contact with whites in his youth, and benefited from a privilege unavailable to most Jamaicans.²⁴ The myth has Garvey as a “black culture hero,” but the reality was that Garvey was staunchly Victorian – including an emulation of the mores of British imperialism. Despite living in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, Garvey

bad-mouthed Afro-American cultural expressions such as jazz. The music heard during Garveyite gatherings at Liberty Hall was light classical music. The models of literacy Garvey held up to blacks were usually British. Indeed, Robert Hill makes the case that Garvey's slogan "One God, One Aim, One Destiny" was a paraphrase of a patriotic line written by Tennyson on the occasion of Queen Victoria's opening of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition:

Sons, be welded each and all,
 Into one imperial whole,
 One with Britain, heart and soul
 One life, one flag, one fleet, one Throne²⁵

Garvey had no interest in sub-Saharan Africa: he looked to the northeast Africa of the Pharaohs. Even the images of Ethiopia he employed were filtered through a Victorian lense.²⁶

Since my discussion of Garvey is meant to provide context for Bob Marley's role in the evolution of an interracial culture, I want to focus on Garvey's efforts to "repress" interraciality. Indeed, one could say that Garvey "perfected" the repression of interraciality in diasporic African culture, and that Marley represents a "return of the repressed." The pervasiveness of interracial themes in Marley's life and work is proportionate to the zeal with which Garvey and like-minded "Black Zionists" repressed the interraciality in which they were embedded.

Garvey's method regarding the recovery of black history, and the repression of interraciality, is consistent: he employs rumor as a form of semiotic warfare. This is evident in his advice on how to deal with threats to a "racial community." Garvey's general advice is as follows: "Insist on a campaign of race purity . . . and close ranks against all other races. It is . . . a disgrace to mix up your race with other races." For those who disobey this strategy, Garvey's advice is more specific: Negroes who marry outside the race, especially those who marry below their socioeconomic status, are to be excommunicated.

Teach the people to abhor such Negroes, and have nothing to do with them so long as they continue in that relationship. This must be done [out of] the hearing of the white race. For safety, let the advice take the [form] of a whisper campaign. . . [W]hisper it right through the neighborhood and never stop until the burden of your campaign is felt by the individuals, so as to learn them a good lesson that others may not do the same thing with impunity.²⁷

Garvey urged the same "whispering campaign" against Jews. "Never trust a Jew," he advised.

He plays with loaded dice, his card is marked, you can never win against him. Make this a secret whispering propaganda in every community where you go into a Negro home. Whisper all the time that the Jew is bad . . . he believes he is the

chosen of God and as such all other men must pay tribute to him. This is false . . . Jewish propaganda, ignore it and let him pay tribute to you if tribute must be paid.

If necessary, "let them know that they were once your slaves in Egypt."²⁸

Garvey often employs the same tactics he has condemned in whites, or in Jews. In the above passage he condemns "Jewish propaganda" as "false and fictitious." But in the interests of constructing a positive black history, Garvey sanctions a "fictitious" form of "black propaganda." Reading material should be scanned "to see what you can pick out for the good of the race," Garvey said. "Search all history and all literature and the Bible and find facts to support this argument" that blacks are superior. "*Things that may not be true can be made if you repeat them long and often enough.* Therefore, always repeat statements that will give your race a status and an advantage. That is how the white man has built up his system of superiority."²⁹

In each of these three examples, Garvey achieves an imagined "racial purity" and a heroic "black community" through a repression of the multiethnic interconnectedness in which he is embedded. The artificiality of his construction of a "black history" which used models from imperial Britain, and which ignores all but "fulsome praise," should already be evident. It brings to mind Cabral's warning against the uncritical use of "indiscriminate compliments."³⁰ I want now to comment briefly on Garvey's repression of interraciality in his own life.

Garvey recalled his father as being someone who "always acted as if he did not belong among the villagers." Young Marcus' first playmates were white children, notably four children of a Wesleyan (Methodist) minister, and five children of another white man whose property adjoined the Garveys. Marcus was particularly close to a daughter of the minister. They played together like "two innocent fools who never dreamed of a race feeling and problem." This continued until Marcus turned fourteen, whereupon the minister shipped the girl off to Edinburgh, Scotland, and told his daughter not to try to get in touch with Marcus as he was a "nigger." Wilson Moses argues that "his life-long obsession with intermarriage would seem to indicate that this experience, coming as it did at the age of sexual awakening, was a very traumatic one."³¹

Garvey would later call mixed-race people "degenerates" and "monstrosities." He posited the same sort of "mulattos are trying to control us" conspiracy theories earlier favored by Edward Blyden, Alexander Crummell, and other "mulatto-hating Ethiopian millennialists." Garvey's vitriolic attacks against Du Bois were part of an effort "to read 'light-skinned negroes' out of the black race," believes Jervis Anderson.³² This was a somewhat inconsistent attitude as there were high-ranking

mulattos in Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, such as T. Thomas Fortune, who had been around long enough to join Crummell's American Negro Academy in the 1890s, and to defend Douglass' inter-racial marriage in the 1880s.³³

A key to what made Garvey "tick" – what drove him to embrace and mythologize his particular breed of messianic Ethiopianism – is visible in his account of reading Booker T. Washington's autobiography in London. Garvey asked himself where was the black man's "king and kingdom." Realizing that he could not find them, he vowed: "*I will help to make them.*" And this is exactly what he did: Garvey *created* an imagined African kingdom based at first on a Biblical model of Ethiopia, and later on the most tenuous of references to a "real" Ethiopia which was itself an invented tradition with quasi-Biblical roots.³⁴ Again, the seed sown by Garvey would bear fruit in the mythology of an Ethiopian Zion, carried to the four corners of the earth by Bob Marley.

Bernard Lewis argues that the reinvention of history – as in Garvey's advice to repeat positive versions of black history until accepted as "fact" – is typical of formerly enslaved or colonized peoples. They try "to rewrite the past" – first, to reveal the concealed villainy of the imperialists, and second, "to restore the true image of the pre-imperialist past which the imperialists themselves had defaced and hidden."³⁵ This model accurately describes Garvey's quest to recover a pre-imperial Ethiopia as a mythological cornerstone for his own would-be "black kingdom."

My view of the "inventedness" of Garvey's "black history" is rooted in an awareness that *all* nations and religious traditions are invented. I am only insisting that the roots of Rastafarianism must be subjected to the same critical examination, for instance, as the racial assumptions (and psychological projections) that caused Euro-Americans to imagine a white Jesus – or the assumptions that led the "founding fathers" to imagine a "democracy" limited to white male landowners. Furthermore, just because we say something is *invented* does not make it any less *real*, as Werner Sollors notes. We must look closely at the "psychological reality" of the people who invented traditions, in order to understand their internal logic. With Garvey, we must understand his "psychological structure," in order to understand what compelled him to project messianic aspirations on to Ethiopia.³⁶

Garvey's quest to "help make" an African kingdom, and to recreate himself as its king-in-waiting, became a secular religion. Garvey's movement has been described as a religion by E. Franklin Frazier, Randall Burkett, and Garvey himself. Garvey wrote that "The masses of the race absorb the doctrines of the UNIA with the same eagerness with which the masses in the days of . . . imperial Rome accepted Christianity. The

people seem to regard the movement in the light of a new religion.”³⁷ Garvey called his new religion “African Fundamentalism,” with the subtitle: “A racial heirarchy and empire for Negroes.” It was formulated during a fundamentalist revival that swept the United States after World War I. As with any fundamentalism, “religious truth,” not historical accuracy, was the primary concern. Garvey’s “truth” was centered on the notion of “race pride” and required the articulation of a “race catechism.” This catechism was explicitly founded upon the mythology of a pre-imperialist, divinely sanctioned Ethiopia. Garvey’s African Fundamentalism, which emphasized a “Black God,” had its roots in nineteenth-century Ethiopianism. Henry McNeal Turner had written in 1898: “We do not believe that there is any hope for a race of people who do not believe that they look like God.” Garvey’s logic was similar: “since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only now started out . . . to see our God through our own spectacles,” he reasoned. “We Negroes believe in . . . the one God of all ages . . . but we shall worship him through the spectacles of Ethiopia.”³⁸

Garvey’s references to Ethiopia were at first generic and depoliticized.³⁹ He told the 1924 United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) convention in Madison Square Garden: “Our desire is . . . to lay down our burden . . . by the banks of the Niger and sing our songs and chant our hymns to the God of Ethiopia.” This conflation of West Africa and Ethiopia illustrates that Garvey’s Africa is essentially fictional. A geopolitical Ethiopia gradually impacted Garvey’s depiction of a mythological “black kingdom.” By 1930 he declared: “We have great hopes in Abyssinia in the East – the country that has kept her traditions even back to the days of Solomon.” Garvey expressed the confidence that Abyssinia would “rise . . . to *repossess the Imperial Authority* that is promised by God himself in the inspiration: Princes coming out of Egypt and Ethiopia stretching forth her hands.”⁴⁰ But if Garvey’s “lense” through which he viewed Selassie was Biblical, his hopes were political, argues Rupert Lewis: “for a reign based on modernity within the framework of Pan-African solidarity.” His view of Selassie as the head of a geopolitical empire, rather than as a deity, would bring him into conflict with the early Rastas.

Rastafarians attribute to Garvey the prophecy “Look to the East for the coming of an African King.” Such sentiments had been in circulation for some time – for instance, in Pauline Hopkins’ 1903 magazine novel, *Of One Blood*. The source of this oracular utterance may have been James Morris Webb, a clergyman who published a book in 1919 entitled *A Black Man Will Be the Coming Universal King, Proven by Biblical History*. Webb, an associate of Garvey’s, apparently spoke these words at the 1924

UNIA convention.⁴¹ At any rate, after Garvey was deported by the United States, he staged a play in Kingston in 1929 called “The Coronation of the King and Queen of Africa.” Some synchronicity seemed to be at work here, since early Rastas interpreted the play as a rehearsal for Selassie’s coronation on November 2, 1930.⁴²

Garvey expressed scorn for the Rastas he saw in Jamaica before departing for permanent exile in London. Garvey’s followers had marched through Harlem in 1931 carrying posters of Garvey and Selassie. But in 1933 Garvey refused to allow early Rasta leader Leonard Howell to distribute pictures of Selassie at his Kingston headquarters. The *Jamaica Times* reported that in Garvey’s address to the 1934 UNIA convention he “referred to the Ras Tafari cult . . . with contempt.” This contempt was aroused by at least two factors. There was probably a sense of class difference involved. The early Rastafarian movement arose entirely among lower-class Jamaicans. As we have seen, Garvey’s father “acted as if he did not belong” among the villagers. Garvey saw the Rastas as a threat to social order. He grouped the Rastas with “the large number of revivalist cults which are driving our people crazy” – which supports the argument by Chevannes that Rastafarianism was essentially an offshoot of Revivalism for its first quarter century of existence. In addition, Howell’s followers had very early begun treating him as a Christ-figure, and this would have evoked a sense of competition or resentment from Garvey, who had a messianic self-concept. Garvey had no tolerance for those who declared Selassie’s divinity. After Selassie fled Ethiopia following Italy’s invasion, Garvey’s public comments about Selassie became vicious.⁴³

Regarding Garvey’s acknowledged affinity with Mussolini’s fascism, we might ask: what were the similarities between the ways that Mussolini and Garvey treated Ethiopia? Mussolini invaded Ethiopia militarily, because he wanted it as a material anchor to an Italian empire. Garvey “invaded” Ethiopia rhetorically, because he wanted it to serve as a cornerstone of his imagined “black kingdom.” I do not suggest that these two “invasions” can be placed on the same (im)moral plane. But I do think that the parallels between physical and rhetorical “colonialism” reflect a similar imperialistic worldview: a belief in the *right* to colonize, and to fulfill imperial ambitions. Many Rastas inherited Garvey’s view of Africa. They did not usually replicate Garvey’s fascism, although the messianic projections (or aspirations) so visible in Garvey’s life, and Ethiopianism, did remain prominent.

Whether or not Garvey actually uttered the words “Look to the East for the coming of an African King” is less important than that Rastafarians *believed* he had said this. So they set about looking for the “higher one” of

Garvey's prophecy, real or imagined. By the late 1930s a series of events pointed to Ethiopia as the most likely place where "prophecy fulfill."⁴⁴

In June 1931 *National Geographic* published a pictorial of Selassie's coronation, which was passed among Rastas already looking for a black king. The photos of Selassie in his full regalia, and the wording of his official title ("King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah") made a big impression on black Jamaicans. In the midst of an upsurge in Revivalism, they were accustomed to hearing the Salvation Army sing "The Lion of Judah shall break every chain" – a traditional song later recorded by Marley. And so "Marcus Garvey's words come to pass" – the Rastas searched their Bibles and found references in Revelations 19:15–16 and 17:14 to the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" who had hair like wool. Revelations 5 described this Messiah as "the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the shoot growing from David's stock," before whom the elders "were singing a new song." Several preachers "from foreign" appeared on the island, bearing pictures of Selassie and proclaiming: "Look 'pon this man and see if him don't favor the same white Jesus, only thing him black!" These pictures were widely seen as indisputable truth from a world outside Jamaica, where the truth was not suppressed, that the black Jesus had arrived.⁴⁵

The Rastafarians' name comes from Selassie's pre-coronation name: Ras Tafari Makonnen. Ras translates from Amharic literally as "head," and is the equivalent of "Duke." As Bob Marley would later repeat in countless interviews, the Rastas believe since Tafari means "creator," Rastafari is then the "head creator." Both names signified on the Rastafarian belief in a "God within": Rastafari is often rendered as Rasta Far-Eye, or the all-seeing-eye, as in the Masonic symbol on the dollar bill. Selassie-I (power of the trinity) is pronounced Selassie-Eye.

Three international events 1935–37 had a formative influence on Rastafarianism. First was the 1935 reprint of an article titled "Secret Society to Destroy Whites" in the *Jamaica Times*. This piece had first appeared in Europe, and was "almost certainly the work of a proto-Italian lobby," writes Bishton.⁴⁶ The article warned of a "black peril which darkened the European horizon." It claimed a secret warrior society called "NYA-BINGHI" had been formed, which meant "Death to the Whites." The author wrote that this movement was now headquartered in Ethiopia, where "Haile Selassie is regarded as a veritable Messiah, a saviour of the coloured people, the Emperor of the Negro Kingdom."

This article represents a strange confluence of Amhara religious mythology, racist Italian propaganda, fragments of reportage of anticolonial resistance in East Africa, and an uncanny expression of the unconscious projections of black Jamaicans. The article was "intended to scare the

whites into preemptive action," Chevannes writes. But it had an entirely unintended effect in Jamaica, where Rastas found the article to be inspirational evidence of a literal "league of black people against the whites, headed by Haile Selassie." Rastas took the name Nyabinghi for themselves as a sort of "rootsman" alter ego. And so Rastas constructed a self-image as anticolonial warriors and a new chosen people, with whatever they had at hand – a *National Geographic* article, a second-hand piece of fascist propaganda, and a picture of Jomo Kenyatta with a field general whose hair was worn in "dreadlocks."⁴⁷

In 1936 Italy invaded Ethiopia, bringing Selassie to international attention. The Rastas' hero was suddenly also a hero to many other Westerners. In 1937 the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF) was founded in New York. EWF branches were quickly established throughout the Caribbean. The EWF put out a newspaper called the *Voice of Ethiopia*, whose slogan was "One God, One Brotherhood." Many of the Rastas' beliefs can be traced to this paper.⁴⁸

The international cross-currents typical of Garveyism were in effect from the beginning, as can be seen in two of the early Rastafarian "prophets" who adapted Garvey's message. Joseph N. Hibbert (b. 1894) had emigrated from Jamaica to Costa Rica at age seventeen. In Central America, where there was a large contingent of emigrant Jamaicans, he became a member of the Ancient Order of Ethiopia, a Masonic Lodge. Hibbert returned to Jamaica in 1931 to preach the divinity of Haile Selassie. Like several early Rasta preachers, Hibbert was an Ethiopianist Christian, with roots in the Ethiopian Baptist Church founded by George Liele (Lisle). Liele emigrated to Jamaica in 1784 from South Carolina, where he was baptized by a convert of George Whitefield, the legendary barn-storming preacher of the First Great Awakening (sketched in chapter 1).⁴⁹

The best-known Rasta leader, Leonard Howell (1898–1981), was a soldier in Panama and a cook in the US Army Transport Service, by which means he came to New York. Garveyites remembered Howell as a con man. When Howell returned to Jamaica in 1932 he sold thousands of photos of Selassie, passing them off as a "passport" to Ethiopia. An older Rasta interviewed by Derek Bishton remembered Howell appearing on the scene holding a storm lantern, claiming to be an ambassador from Ethiopia sent to do the work of "my father," and identifying himself as "the same Jesus Christ that was crucified." Howell's numerous followers referred to him as "Gong" – which later became Bob Marley's best-known nickname.⁵⁰

Howell developed a sizable following willing to publicly validate his messianic self-concept. He taught that white supremacy represented evil

and black supremacy represented good, with the black good destined to overcome white evil. This view of an immanent racial Armageddon echoed both Garvey and the view of turn-of-the century Jamaican Ethiopianist Alexander Bedward. As with so many Jamaican leaders, Bedward also had spent time in Central America. These folk prophets invariably got much of their prestige from having returned from “foreign” – which in Jamaican context was widely interpreted as a parallel to the sojourns of Moses and Jesus in the wilderness. We will see this archetypal pattern again with Marley. Bedward preached a millennial scenario in which a “black wall” rose up against a “white wall.” “The white wall has oppressed us for years; now we must knock the white wall down,” he told his followers in the 1890s. Like Burning Spear and other reggae singers would do in the late twentieth century, Bedward called on his listeners to “remember the Morant War,” the uprising of 1865 whose black martyr, Paul Bogle, is now a national hero.

The myth of black supremacy replacing white supremacy through an uprising led by a black or brown messiah has been a persistent feature of Jamaican culture for two centuries, weaving in and out of the island's folk culture like the disappearing and reappearing themes of dub music. Garvey, the link between Bedward and Howell, was telling audiences in 1919 that “there will be no democracy in the world until the Negro rules.” But Garvey ostracized Howell. This helped marginalize Rastas “from mainstream political thinking in Jamaica for the next quarter century,” Bishton thinks. Many Rastas donned sackcloth and other symbols of their rejection of “mainstream” society, and retreated to the hills – the repressed theme disappearing for a while. When police destroyed Howell's Pinnacle Compound in 1955, a large group of these millennialist Rastafarians descended into Kingston. Their growing presence in Kingston slums corresponds with Bob Marley's teenage years, and the years leading up to Jamaican independence in 1962.⁵¹

In his ethnographic research among older Rastas, Barry Chevannes found four types of myths about Garvey. One was of Garvey as a Moses figure, with Bedward often seen as the Aaron, or high priest, of the movement. The other three myths were of Garvey as John the Baptist, as himself divine, and as a prophet – the latter group being the most numerous. Garvey's middle name is Mosiah – a cross between Moses and Messiah. But most Rastas have come to feel that Garvey's movement was “only a rehearsal” for what was to come. And this seems to be the view of Garvey that Marley had – as a “culture hero” who combined Moses and “John the Baptist” roles.⁵²

Marley often asserted that Garvey's prophecies were still being fulfilled. And he used “flag” portraits of both Garvey and Selassie as stage

backdrops. On his first Island album, *Catch a Fire*, this verse appears in “Kinky Reggae”:

I went down to Picadilly Circus, there I saw Marcus
He had a tan guitar all over his chocolate bar
Think I might join the fun, but I had to hit and run
I just can't settle down in the kinky part of town.

The mood here is somewhat inscrutable, a seeming commentary on the “Swinging London” scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s that Marley encountered. (There’s a sexual riff going on – the line written as “tan guitar” may have been “candy tart.”) Marley seems to be attracted to the “psychedelic” version of Marcus, but decides that he cannot sink his roots in this subculture.

There are numerous direct and indirect references to Garvey in Marley’s songbook. Marley’s song “So Much Things to Say” (*Exodus*, 1977) invokes Garvey, along with Jesus and Paul Bogle, as martyrs who serve to remind the people of “who you are and where you stand in the struggle.” Marley’s 1979 album *Survival* opens with the exhortation: “Rise ye mighty people.” This invokes Garvey’s rhetorical flourish “Up ye mighty race: you can accomplish what you will.” And Marley’s famous line from “Redemption Song,” “emancipate yourselves from mental slavery” – also signifies on Garvey.⁵³

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Just as many young black Americans look back through the field nigger/house nigger racial mythology of Malcolm X, so Rastas often looked back to Ethiopia through Marcus Garvey’s distorted mirror. If Malcolm’s point of view is misleading, as seen in KRS-One’s dismissal of Frederick Douglass, then Garvey’s blinders would seem to be pernicious, leading to a willful blindness that often ends up supporting the repressive political ideologies that it claims to oppose.

Yet Rastas altered Garvey as much as Garvey reinvented Ethiopia. They followed the “black first” philosophy to its logical conclusion: if Africa was the mother of all races, then “The Whole World is Africa,” as Black Uhuru would sing. Quoting the Bible, Marley sang of black people: “the stone that the builder refused shall be the head cornerstone.” Yet the edifice itself, clearly, was multiracial, for those who chose to read the Bible, and history, inclusively. Far more so than Garvey or earlier Ethiopianists, the Rastas most grew to think inclusively. Their Zion was most immediately for black people, but ultimately it was “a house of prayer for all people.”⁵⁴ A “One Love” shift was underway before Marley began recording, but he personified and extended this inclusive tendency. Marley’s biraciality must be seen as a key to this shift.

STRUCTURE

Anti-mulatto prejudice in Jamaican history and Marley's life

Bob Marley was born to a white father and black mother in 1945, at a time in Jamaica when there was a huge gulf between black and white worlds. In an interview included in the video *Time Will Tell*, Marley was asked if he was prejudiced against whites, or whose side he was on. "I don't have prejudice against myself," Marley reasoned. "My father was a white and my mother black. Them call me half-caste, or whatever. Well, me don't dip on nobody's side. Me don't dip on the black man's side nor the white man's side. Me dip on God's side, the one who create me and cause me to come from black and white."⁵⁵

Marley here expresses both a memory of the hostility he encountered because of his biraciality, and the transracial philosophy he evolved in order to unite "racial" differences within a greater whole. The "anti-mulatto" prejudice Marley experienced marked him deeply, as his family has affirmed. His insistence on combining black liberation with multi-racial redemption represents, in the light of his personal and cultural history, a remarkable synthesizing effort (and one, it must be emphasized, firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian precedent).

Marley's father was not around to help raise him. Bob (or Nesta, as his mother called him) only saw him a few times before the older man died. Bob came of age in Kingston's shanty towns and absorbed a grassroots anticolonial religious culture that worshiped (or looked for inspiration to) a great African Father in Ethiopia. Bob would reinvent this African Father, at first for himself, for all Rastas, and finally for an international audience. The journey is a long one, a cultural, political, and spiritual "exodus" that I can only sketch in broad strokes here. The story begins in a history of "fundamental ambivalence towards Jamaicans of Mixed race," as Richard Burton writes – an ambivalence whose one extreme was a sometimes rabid anti-"brown" prejudice in Jamaican history, and whose other extreme was a tendency to project messianic qualities on to mixed-race leaders.⁵⁶

At the time of independence in 1962, Jamaica was 77 percent black, 20 percent brown, 1 percent white, and 2 percent Asian. A "brown stratum" had been a firmly established intermediate class since the early colonial days. In contrast to North America's "peculiar institution," West Indian slaveholders usually recognized their biracial offspring and often arranged for their education in Europe. Horace Campbell remarks that many slave revolts were betrayed by "mulattoes who were the eyes and