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Rastafari: A Modern Method of Marronage

by

Melvin Douglas

Under the Direction of Monique Moultrie, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, the Rastafarian religion emerged. Considering the West as “Babylon”, likening themselves to the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible, and believing that Blacks were still in mental, political, and economic slavery; they claimed Ethiopia’s Haile Selassie I as God and urged Blacks to flee the enslavement of the West. I contend that following a religion that espoused a Black god and rejected the most popularly taught Christian doctrines was a modern method of marronage. The lived religious experiences of the Rastafari, from the growing of dreadlocks to physical repatriation, function as methods of flight from the clutches of “Babylon” or captivity. This thesis will show that within these aspects are located the historical concepts of both petit marronage and grand marronage. Utilizing an intersectional framework, I will also discuss the dilemma that faces women practitioners, e.g., subjugation in the face of a perceived freedom from Babylonian bondage.

INDEX WORDS: Rastafari, Marronage, Repatriation, Mental enslavement

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2021

Rastafari: A Method of Modern Marronage

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August 2021

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, particularly my wife Veronica, our son Xander, and my father, Rev. Melvin L. Douglas, who now walks with the Ancestors. It is also dedicated to all those who supported me and stuck by me during the best of times and the worst of times. Your dedication has meant the world to me.

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INTRODUCTION

Jamaican scholar Rex Nettleford called Rastafari “one of the most significant phenomena to emerge out of the modern history and sociology of Plantation America, that New World culturesphere of which Jamaica and the Caribbean are a part.”¹ Despite the fact that Rastafari has inspired many hundreds of academic works in English alone² and has spread throughout the world, the religion and its followers are grossly misunderstood worldwide, even in the home of their origin, Jamaica. This thesis examines the idea of Rastafari as a modern method of marronage and makes use of varied methodological approaches and academic lenses through which to construct a view that perceives the Rastafari religion as marronage. As such, the Rastafari as resistance/marronage model speaks to the collective but can be understood by examining the individual practitioner as well.

Historically, there were two distinct types of marronage, grand and petit marronage. Grand marronage was seen as long-term or permanent escape from bondage, being completely removed from the plantation. Petit marronage included an existence where the slave was still on or around the plantation, but “out of sight,” so to speak. This included the act of pillaging the plantation to gain sustenance and other survival needs. I characterize Rastas who repatriate or reside in solitary communities as performing grand marronage. These include those who repatriated to Shashamane or those such as Jamaica’s Boboshanti who live to themselves on

¹ Owens, Joseph, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (Kingston, JA: Sangster's Book Stores, 1976), quoted in Velma Pollard, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 3.

² Bonacci, Giulia, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, and Elikia M'Bokolo, *Exodus!: Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia* (Kingston, JA: The University of the West Indies Press, 2015), 2-3.

Bobo Hill, just outside of Kingston. Practitioners who remain in general society will be presented as engaging in petit marronage. There have historically been places of overlap as well. One area of overlap occurs when positioning lifelong practitioners of the religion and those who seem to develop an ideology completely set against traditional Western, Eurocentric idealisms as engaging in grand marronage, whether or not they changed their location of residence. Scholar of Rastafari, Monique Bedasse agrees with my decision, as she explicates that marronage can be achieved “spiritually, psychologically, intellectually, and physically.”³ Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song” is inspired by a famous Marcus Garvey quote that calls for Blacks to “emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind...”⁴ Since Garvey was so integral in the inception of Rastafari, for me this clearly implies that within Rastafari, a major element of the idea of freedom includes not merely liberation from external bondage, but also from internal bondage. This gives them a way in which to live as a free and liberated being, emancipated from the mentality of “Babylon,” the Rasta term for the West and its ideology, that according to them, banishes the majority of Blacks in the West to a slavelike existence.⁵

I begin with an introduction to the backstory surrounding understandings of marronage and a brief synopsis of the histories of both marronage and the establishment of Rastafari in Jamaica. I then proceed to analyze the ways in which I consider Rastafari to exist as a modern method of marronage. Using mostly a socio-historical methodology, I also utilize both

³ Bedasse, Monique, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1.

⁴ John Tattrie, “The African Nova Scotian Roots of Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song,’” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada, February 3, 2017, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-african-nova-scotian-roots-of-bob-marleys-redemption-song>.

⁵ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 178.

functionalist and Women's Studies lenses and the study of lived religion as ways of examining and interpreting how my theories are reinforced by the real-world expressions and activities of the Rastafari. I also include a significant look at a major critique of my idea. Some scholars claim that Rastafari cannot authentically be labeled as a method of marronage because its tenets subjugate women. I conclude with a discussion of why consideration of this argument is important in our current social climate and for the future.

At the onset, I must address an idea that pertains to the classification of Rastafari as a religion. Most Rastas do not view their faith as a religion, but rather a "way of life." As a former Rasta, this was the ideology that I maintained during the nearly 17 years that I considered myself an adherent. Scholar Giulia Bonacci feels the Rastafari resists being categorized. She mentions several scholars of Rastafari, including Horace Campbell and Barry Chevannes, who may classify Rastafari as a sort of movement and not religion.⁶ However, I disagree, and will classify Rastafari as religion. While I agree that defining Rastafari as religion may be off-putting to some Rastas, I contend that from an etic perspective, I am indeed correct in my analysis. I have chosen to define Rastafari as such based on religious studies scholar Bruce Lincoln's polythetic definition of religion, presented in his 2008 book *Holy Terrors*.⁷ He posits that if something fulfills all four criteria, then it may accurately be classified as religion.⁸ These categories are discourse, practice, community, and institution.⁹ Rastafari maintains a viable discourse by means

⁶ Bonacci, Giulia, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, and Elikia M'Bokolo, *Exodus!: Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia* (Kingston, JA: The University of the West Indies Press, 2015), 5-6.

⁷ Lincoln, Bruce, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 5-8

⁸ Although my inspiration came directly from Lincoln's book, I must note that his ideas were inspired by earlier work done by J.Z. Smith. Additionally, Smith's general concept of a polythetic approach was derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein stressed the need for so-called family resemblances that could provide a non-essentialist definition of religion focused on commonalities present in things we consider to be religion.

⁹ Lincoln, 5-8.

of I-talk or Iyahric as well as a plethora of Rasta theological work based on the biblical text as well as non-biblical texts. The religion has active practices such as the smoking of ganja, the wearing of dreadlocks, and the act of repatriation. The Rastafari not only maintain community but emphasizes it. Largescale microsocieties such as Pinnacle and the Boboshanti community, which will be discussed later have been maintained in a very separate manner, in the midst of Babylon. The Rastafari, though perhaps seemingly anti-institution, maintains institutions, such as the Nyabinghi Order, the Ethiopian African Black International Congress (EABIC) and other so-called Rasta churches. Thus, I conclude that I am justified in my categorization.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RASTAFARI AND HISTORICAL MARRONAGE IN JAMAICA

What is marronage? Marronage comes from the root word “maroon.” “Maroon” originates from the Spanish word *cimarrón*, which referred to cattle that would escape captivity on the island of Hispaniola. The term would come to denote any escaped slave, Amerindian or African, and would later come to refer exclusively to Black people who escaped chattel slavery.¹⁰ Scholars commonly differentiate between two types of marronage, although there exists an expansive amount of overlap between them. I will point out in certain areas later in this thesis that this overlap may be so great that it warrants a reconsidering of the scholarly value of separating the types. Nonetheless, “petit marronage,” or running away, implies a strategy of resistance in which individuals or small groups escaped enslavement for a short period of days or weeks and then returned to the captivity of their plantation. “Grand marronage” refers to individuals or communities who permanently escaped bondage, often forming their own intricate

¹⁰ Roberts, Neil, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.

village systems that thrived.¹¹ Modern scholars have manufactured and utilized definitions that may be described as simultaneously expanding, simplifying, and/or problematizing the term. Website *Taller Electric Marronage*¹², a site dedicated to modern interpretations and ideologies of marronage, states that the term “marronage” describes “the varying states involved in flight and survival.”¹³ Neil Roberts claims that it refers to individuals who detach from a surrounding group in order to establish a “fully autonomous community.”¹⁴ I, like Richard Price, define it simply as flight¹⁵—flight from any form of ensnarement or captivity. It begins the moment one takes flight to escape any system or sense of oppression.

Jamaica possessed a lengthy and ripe history of marronage. When the British defeated the Spanish to gain control of Jamaica in 1655, there had been a Spanish system of chattel slavery in place. Almost immediately, the British had to begin dealing with slave revolts in increasing amounts.¹⁶ These would escalate during the years of 1673-1690. Two distinct maroon communities would eventually come to be: the Leeward Maroons of the west, and the Windward Maroons of the eastern part of the island. These maroon societies would become so successful that they would establish entire free cities such as Cudjoe’s Town, named after renown maroon Cudjoe, and Nanny Town, named after the legendary maroon, Queen Nanny. Nanny is honored

¹¹ Marjoleine Kars, “Maroons and Marronage,” Oxford Bibliographies. Oxford University Press, August 30, 2016, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0229.xml>.

¹² Taller Electric Marronage is a curated website created by a network of scholars, writers, and artists that explore the histories, meaning, and future of marronage. I believe their definition and approach to marronage does well in situating marronage as continuing and not solely as a product of the past. This is important because Rastafari is a living religion and the Rastafari’s marronage efforts are ongoing and change with the implementation of new ideas and technologies.

¹³ “Taller Electric Marronage-About,” Taller Electric Marronage, n.d., <https://www.electricmarronage.com/about>.

¹⁴ Roberts, Neil, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.

¹⁵ Price, Richard, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1.

¹⁶ Orlando Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts: A Sociohistorical Analysis of the First Maroon War, 1665-1740,” in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, ed. Richard Price (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 1996, 246-250.

as one of Jamaica's national heroes and is now on the face of the 500 Jamaican Dollar banknote.¹⁷ Both the Leeward and Windward maroons would force the British to acknowledge them as sovereign nations and sign treaties with them.

It was out of this climate of resistance that the Rastafari would emerge in the 1930s. At the heart of Rastafari's creation lies the idea of marronage. Any complete account of Rastafari history would demand volumes. Here, I will offer a succinct synopsis of early Rasta history. As Rupert Lewis states, most scholars focus the origins of Rastafari on two events: Haile Selassie's coronation in 1930 and Marcus Garvey's writings on what this meant to Black people in the West.¹⁸ The Rastafari were those who heard a call to look to Africa for a Black king to be crowned who would be their redeemer. Most often, this call has historically been attributed to Marcus Garvey. This is the dominant narrative in Rasta history. During the approximately 17 years in which I practiced Rastafari, this is what I was taught by elders and believed. However, historical records have been found that suggest the phrase actually came from a 1924 speech by Rev. James Morris Webb at Liberty Hall.¹⁹ This has recently been echoed by Rastafari scholar Charles Webb in his book *Becoming Rasta: Origins of Rastafari Identity in Jamaica*. Rasta Elder/Ancient Ras Flako Tafari and other so-called Ancients agree with Webb and have given witness that this was in fact the case. Consequently, I conclude that Rev. Webb was the catalyst

¹⁷ "Nanny of the Maroons Part II," Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture: Jamaica's National Heroes. Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070928010812/http://www.moec.gov.jm/heroes/nannycont.htm>.

¹⁸ Lewis, Rupert. "Marcus Garvey and the Early Rastafarians: Continuity and Discontinuity," in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 145.

¹⁹ Team RasTafari, "Reverend James Morris Webb 'Look to Africa' Speech Mistaken for Garvey," RasTafari TV: 24/7 Strictly Conscious Multimedia Network (RasTafari TV Network, October 27, 2015), <https://rastafari.tv/reverend-james-morris-webb-look-to-africa-speech-mistaken-for-garvey/>.

for this calling, and as such, should be attributed with more credit than Marcus Garvey in the development of Rastafari.

On November 2, 1930, Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned as Emperor of Ethiopia and given the new name and title of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I, Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings of Ethiopia, and Elect of God.²⁰ Following his enthronement and the bestowal of these imperial titles, he would become more commonly known as Haile Selassie or Haile Selassie I. Shortly after this, Leonard Percival Howell, a man who had heard Webb's call, began preaching the divinity of Haile Selassie and all Black people. He became especially dangerous to colonial authorities because he preached that the Black man had only one king, Haile Selassie, not the king of England.²¹ Eventually, he was incarcerated. After his release, he took his followers to a remote area of St. Catherine and established a commune known as Pinnacle.²² Howell is known as the first Rasta. Howell, his assistant Robert Hinds, Archibald Dunkley, and Joseph Hibbert are the leaders who would shape the development of the religion and its earliest ideological stance.²³ Crucial to this ideology would be Howell's book, *The Promised Key*, and *The Holy Piby*, or *The Black Man's Bible* by Shepherd Robert Athlyi Rogers, founder of the pre-Rasta Afro-Anglican Constructive Gaathly (Church).²⁴ These texts remain as primary texts for the Rastafari until this day.

²⁰ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 70.

²¹ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 71.

²² Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 2.

²³ Stewart, Dianne, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 121.

²⁴ Rogers, Shepherd Robert Athlyi, *The Holy Piby: The Black Man's Bible* (London: White Crane Publishing, 2011), ix, xiii.

As I have stated, Jamaica has a long history of marronage and Maroon culture. The Rastafari have brought the concept of marronage into the modern era. From their early years to contemporary 21st century Rastafari, marronage has taken on a new meaning within the religion. The Rastafari vision of marronage considers not only the removal of oneself from Eurocentric society, but also Eurocentric social norms, as well as Eurocentric ways of being and knowing. The scope of Rastafari thought on marronage could not be considered cohesive, as if there is some sort of canonical philosophy. However, it is the Rastafari collectively who have kept the idea of marronage and repatriation alive, not only in the hearts of Rastafari or Jamaicans, but to many throughout the African diaspora. The Rastafari religion has grown worldwide, showing that marronage has valid meaning for the world's Black people, even if already existing in Africa, as we will explore later in this work. This lies in part to Rastafari's reimagining of the ideas of marronage as freedom from mental enslavement and/or Babylonian society. They have two basic methods of achieving this: the Rasta livity and repatriation.

MARRONAGE THROUGH PRACTICES AND LIVED RELIGION

The Rastafari have a word for their practices and lifestyle. That word is *livity*. Livity has an extremely broad expanse of understanding. Every aspect of the Rasta's life, from the chosen hairstyle to fashion choices may be considered expressions of Rastafari livity. In this chapter, I will consider how the practices and lived religion of the Rastas, or Rastafari livity, serve to advance the narrative of marronage not only in Rasta ideology, but also through the experiences of the Rastafari. The study of lived religion focusses on how the religion is practiced, encountered, and experienced by its adherents.²⁵ Although this varies widely and is highly

²⁵ Knibbe, Kim, and Helena Kupari, "Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2, (2020): 159.

individualized, I will show how the practice of the individual is influenced by the community and how the community is served by individual practice. As there are a wide array of practices to interpret, I will focus on three that are considered key identifiers of Rastafari. They are I-talk, also called Iyahric or dread talk, the wearing of dreadlocks, and the use of marijuana or ganja.

Amongst the Rastafari, the intentional use of words is known as *word-sound power* or *word-sound-power*. It is based in the belief that all words have power, distinct vibrations, and contain the potential to effect change in the universe. The Rastafari's linkage of themselves with Jah (God) endows them with the power to manifest materiality or change through the utterance of words. Goldson calls word-sound power a way of "ritualizing the power of Jah through Rastafari livity."²⁶ Noel Erskine hails word-sound, or dread talk, as Rastafari's most prolific offering to culture.²⁷ While I do not necessarily agree with that sentiment, the enormity of dread talk's impact cannot be overlooked. Its creation has also been a particularly useful addition to modern marronage philosophy.

What is I-talk and how does it contribute to the Rasta's exodus from Babylon? Basically, I-talk is a word system that often replaces the first syllable of certain words with the word "I." However, the "I" may be injected into the middle of words as well. For example, forever becomes *forIver*, while man or mon becomes *I-on*. Additionally, words may be altered as a way of altering their vibration to promote life over death or to describe the mood of the word more accurately and closely. For example, oppress becomes *downpress*, as it describes an action in a way that denotes negativity by the usage of the word down being interjected into the original

²⁶ Randy R. Goldson, "Jah in the Flesh: An Examination of Spirit, Power, and Divine Envelopment in Rastafari" (PhD diss., Temple University, 2020), 283.

²⁷ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 165.

word. Another example of this technique can be seen in the word “diet.” Rastas will often say “*livi*,” citing the belief that to link the word “die” to the way of eating is negative and death promoting rather than life promoting. Another glaring example of this comes in the way that Rastas mention Haile Selassie I. The Roman numeral “I,” denoting that Selassie was the first monarch with that particular given imperial name, is pronounced as the long vowel sound “I.”

Dread talk should not be confused with slang. It is much more than that. To start, it is the creation of another language with its own intrinsic meaning. I am not one to argue for hard distinctions between the sacred and the secular, but I would classify Iyahric²⁸ as being used in a sacred role for the Rastafari. It is their everyday language as well as the language in ritual. Often a Rasta will use it in rituals, particularly public functions, even if they do not typically use it in everyday life. However, it is even more than that. For the Rastafari, this language is part of their mental marronage. I-talk is a means of taking back something that belonged to Black people of the diaspora. That something was language. No matter what you label it, I-talk, Iyahric, or dread talk, it serves as an Africanized language that, at least before reggae music exploded worldwide, was unique to Black people. I liken the function of I-talk to that of the “X” in the Nation of Islam. While Western born Black people rarely know their original languages or names, these constructs serve as substitutes or placeholders. As such, it can be viewed as also having a method of freeing the users from Babylon because as Erskine points out, the replacing of our native languages with European languages was a key factor in the “enslavement process.”²⁹ Erskine further elaborates by stating that the “ultimate signifier of their alienation from Africa and

²⁸ Iyahric is another name for dread talk that happens to be a form of it. It is a reworking of the word Amharic. Amharic, being the language of most Ethiopians, holds a particular fondness for the Rastafari. It should be noted that actual Amharic or even forms of Amharic words are rarely used in dread talk. Amharic phrases are occasionally used in ritual celebrations. There are also some Rasta groups that offer Amharic lessons, particularly to the youth.

²⁹ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 165.

blackness was being required to use the language of Babylon.”³⁰ I agree with this idea. For some, the daily usage of your oppressor’s language is a constant affront to the self. Rastas believe the so-called Queen’s English is a method of indoctrination by the *downpressor* (oppressor). Even words like downpressor are important because they give the user the opportunity to deconstruct the Queen’s English and reconstruct it into something that serves them.³¹ Part of the way to be free from mental enslavement is to not buy into the indoctrination process. Any way in which to “beat down Babylon”, so to speak, no matter how small, serves a larger purpose over time. With the immense importance that Rastas give to words, this is no small task. It becomes a daily, near constant expression of resistance to cultural and mental slavery.

In Jamaican patois, either “me” or “mi” is standardly used as an object and subject. For this reason, the Rastafari believe that this causes people to think of themselves as the object. Therefore, the Rastafari use “I-an-I” as a subject, regardless of syntactical rules, as a means of assertion.³² For the Rastafari, the usage of “me” or “mi” is vocalized subservience. It does not hold the same power, audibly or in so-called “higher vibrations”, as the pronoun I and according to Father Joseph Owens, is “representative of the self-degradation that was expected of the slaves by their masters.”³³ Both Velma Pollard and Jalani Bongo-Niaah also believe that the strong sound of the “I” when used by Rastas is prominent among the sounds of I-talk,³⁴ with Bongo-

³⁰ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 166.

³¹ Randy R. Goldson, “Jah in the Flesh: An Examination of Spirit, Power, and Divine Envesselment in Rastafari” (PhD diss., Temple University, 2020), 284.

³² Edmonds, Ennis B. “Dread “I” In-a-Babylon: Ideological Resistance and Cultural Revitalization,” in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 33.

³³ Owens, Joseph, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (Kingston, JA: Sangster's Book Stores, 1976), 65.

³⁴ Pollard, Velma, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 11.

Niaah referring to it as a “more powerful invocation of self”³⁵ than “me.” This language presented both the Rasta man and Rasta woman with a sense of assertiveness that remained aloof to the average Jamaican.

The effect of deliberate linguistic modifications like these are integral in the process of modern marronage. In 1986, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o released the book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Besides from popularizing the idea of decolonizing the mind, this work presented an argument for the power and importance of using African languages to publish both literature and scholarship. He views English as a way for the English to impose their language as the language of power in a colony that they claimed as theirs. In a 2021 interview on the podcast “To the Best of Our Knowledge,” he states that the language of the colonizer “becomes the language of intelligence, of education, of intellectual exploration.”³⁶ Jamaica was colonized by England. The creation of the Rastafari religion came about under colonial rule. Using a language that was Africanized, or looked at as one’s own, was, in fact, a marker of freedom in some respects. Although it may not have had outwardly apparent benefits, the mental benefit was tremendous. Ngugi wa Thiong'o insists that “the best way to ‘decolonize the African mind’ is to reclaim African languages.”³⁷ Although not truly an African language, the Rasta present dread talk as very much inspired by Africa. This can be seen in calling it Iyahric, as this likens it to the Ethiopian language of Amharic. Decades before the phrase “decolonize the mind” became popular, the Rastafari were using language in the very way

³⁵ Bongo-Niaah, Jalani, “Grafting a New History: Rastafari Memory Gems Articulating a ‘Hermeneutics of Babylon’,” in *Africa and Its Diasporas: History, Memory and Literary Manifestations*, ed. Naana Opoku-Agyemang, Paul E. Lovejoy, and David V. Trotman (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press), 2008, 129.

³⁶ Steve Paulson, “Never Write in The Language of The Colonizer: Kenyan Author and Playwright Ngugi Wa Thiong’o On the Power of Writing in Your Native Language,” Wisconsin Public Radio, March 26, 2021. <https://www.wpr.org/never-write-language-colonizer>.

³⁷ Ibid.

that wa Thiong'o presents. This precursor to the idea of decolonizing the mind may be viewed as part of the Rasta's mental marronage. In the same interview, also states that although economic and political ramifications of colonization are easier to see, "the colony of the mind is harder to see... [it] is almost invisible."³⁸ It is this so-called colony of the mind that is critical in the Rasta's understanding of freedom. This mental colony is the plantation from which the Rastafari seek to escape. In some ways, language is the root from which this process begins, the foundation of marronage in this sense. It gives the Rastafari the power to "define their own reality on their own terms."³⁹ This is why I begin this chapter by analyzing dread talk.

Adrian Anthony McFarlane agrees with my inclusion of I-talk as part of a marronage effort. He states of the expression "I-an-I" that it "creates a linguistic device that provides a new sense of self-liberation for a people of the African diaspora."⁴⁰ He goes on to say that out of this comes a "new sense of self that leads to a new vision of values... as well as power."⁴¹ Enslavement, physical or mental, is about a balance of power. I-talk gives Rastas a vehicle that shifts the balance of power. This is principally since they attribute power to word-sound. It is the "I" and "I-an-I" that are the most potent in the I-talk lexicon. These two, especially, are words of freedom. McFarlane also attests to this "ability to command the self"⁴² that the words "I" and "I-an-I" have. Pollard agrees that the usage of "I" and "I-an-I" are indeed auditory responses against

³⁸ Steve Paulson, "Never Write in The Language of The Colonizer: Kenyan Author and Playwright Ngugi Wa Thiong'o On the Power of Writing in Your Native Language," Wisconsin Public Radio, March 26, 2021. <https://www.wpr.org/never-write-language-colonizer>.

³⁹ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 167.

⁴⁰ Adrian Anthony McFarlane, "The Epistemological Significance of "I-an-I" as a Response to Quashie and Anancyism in Jamaican Culture," in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 107.

⁴¹ Adrian Anthony McFarlane, "The Epistemological Significance of "I-an-I" as a Response to Quashie and Anancyism in Jamaican Culture," in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 107.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 108.

oppression. She believes that “I” is the strongest word in the Rasta system of talking, stating “not only is it the ego but the seeing eye.”⁴³ This eye is one that figuratively sees daily through an Africanized lens. Erskine also describes the way in which I-talk links the Rastafari to Haile Selassie through a linguistic, but also religious way. That way is the usage of the term “I-an-I.” He describes it as a “rebirth.”⁴⁴ I feel that this rebirth is the birthing of the Rasta’s mind back into a freedom of Africanized thought. Although language may be considered the foundation of the Rastafari’s marronage effort, many other aspects of their everyday lived religion are pertinent vehicles for marronage. Among these is cannabis.

Cannabis arrived in Africa about a thousand years ago. Although, the plant was indigenous to South Asia and had been in use there, Africa possessed an established smoking culture that renovated the way the plant was utilized, as well as how it would be viewed for centuries to come. That smoking culture that began in Africa would spread and be cultivated worldwide.⁴⁵ Marijuana usage amongst the Rastafari is so well known that it has seemingly become synonymous with the religion in mainstream culture. While many scholars have written on the Rastafari’s use of ganja, few, have likened it to marronage or liberation. However, I posit that part of the reason why it is chief among herbs amongst the Rastafari is because it is an immediate way to “free” one’s mind.⁴⁶ Without a doubt, smoking ganja alters the way in which the smoker contemplates and engages with the realm of thought. Smoking, followed by chanting and singing praises to a Black god guides the adherent’s mind towards a vision of divinity cloaked in blackness or in Africa, Zion for the Rastafari. As Carole Yawney points out, ganja

⁴³ UWI Press, “Dread Talk- Part 1,” March 30, 2016, video, 17:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4YHfx86dbA>.

⁴⁴ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 167.

⁴⁵ Duvall, Chris S., *The African Roots of Marijuana* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁴⁶ Edmonds, Ennis B. *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 60.

gives “inspiration enough to penetrate to the core of whatever is currently occupying their attention”⁴⁷ and God reveals himself to the user. At that core, for the Rasta lies Jah Rastafari, the Black god and king. Erskine also backs a similar notion. He details the religiosity that accompanies the Rasta’s smoking of ganja. Additionally, he posits that the Rastafari believe that “Jah chooses to reveal God-self”⁴⁸ to people via the usage of certain herbs. Marijuana is also seen as the conduit that lifts the veil that Babylon has placed over the eyes of society.⁴⁹ This is certainly another way in which the use of ganja can be utilized as marronage. It is seen as a way to free one’s thinking from the societal norms that have been shaped by Westernization and Eurocentricity.

The herb is part of the Rastafari’s lived religion, and its use is ritualized. As Owens notes, Rastas often set up the act of smoking as set aside, sacred, in the face of mundane activities. He witnessed that Rastas when smoking, alone or amongst their counterparts, will begin by ceasing speech, removing their tams, and offering a blessing upon themselves in the name of Jah.⁵⁰ Rastas often use the term “hold a meds”, with “meds” referring to meditation, namely through smoking. Rastas feel that this facilitates a sort of merging with Jah, allowing “the I” to supplant normal time and space. While Babylon may control the time/space continuum, for the Rastafari Jah exists beyond that. Ganja allows them access to that dimension, leaving the slavery that the Babylon system manifests. Marijuana is not only a sacrament, but also a key. It is the key that unlocks the mind into a new world of thought; thought that frees the Rasta from Babylon’s order.

⁴⁷ Carole Yawney, “Dread Wasteland: Rastafarian Ritual in West Kingston, Jamaica,” in *Ritual Symbolism and Ceremonialism in the Americas: Studies in Symbolic Anthropology*, ed. N. Ross Crumrine (Greeley, CO: University of Northern Colorado), 1978, 156.

⁴⁸ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 96.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁰ Owens, Joseph, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (Kingston, JA: Sangster's Book Stores, 1976), 140-141.

While Babylon's order teaches artificiality and appears consumed with newer and newer technologies, the Rastafari consider the complete universe to be organically connected. They believe that total wellness lies in harmony with organic principles rather than the trappings of Babylon.⁵¹ This mentality, they concede, is the antithesis to the mentality espoused by Babylon.

Many Rastas link the herb directly to Africa in some way. Maintaining a connection to Zion is also integral in the liberation of the enslaved mind. It could be noted that in some ways, this may be likened to the Indigenous, African knowledge of medicinal herbs. Knowledge of herbal and so-called "bush" remedies have been a staple of the African diaspora. A favorite Rasta saying calls ganja the "healing of the nations." As such, they believe it to be a balm or salve to the pathology that Babylon has inflicted on the African mind. It projects the Rasta into a state that may be described as similar to those who are in states of trance or possession. However, as Dianne Stewart acknowledges, many Rastas consider spirit possession taboo or even evil.⁵² Despite this fact, I posit that heavy ganja usage may be an effort to reach a trancelike state similar to those of practitioners of African religions. This belief is backed by Anna Waldstein's ethnographic observations as well as the work of others.⁵³ Although her work focuses on a London-based, not Jamaican, Rastafari community, the idea of mental freedom is a sentiment held close by Rastas worldwide. She writes of witnessing the use of the herb being present in rituals where some adherents exhibited "altered states of consciousness."⁵⁴ This state may be viewed as an escape from conditions that Babylon inflicts upon them on a daily basis.

⁵¹ Edmonds, Ennis B. *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 60.

⁵² Stewart, Dianne, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132.

⁵³ Waldstein, Anna, " Studying the Body in Rastafari Rituals: Spirituality, Embodiment and Ethnographic Knowledge," *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* 2, no. 1, (2016): 79-80.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

While not necessarily out of Babylon's grasp in a physical sense, the herb allows them a mental release from the pressures and clutches of colonization and its aftermath.

One of the forms of mental enslavement that Rastafari seeks freedom from is terribly familiar to most Black people. It regards the Eurocentric standards by which Africanized hair is judged, from both outside and from inside the Black diaspora. Straighter or curlier hair that more closely mimics European hair is called "good hair," while clearly hair that is texturally African is labeled as bad. This self-hate/mental enslavement is due to white supremacy and the privilege that Europeanized features have been given by diasporic Africans. The Rastafari may be counted as exceptional in that they rejoice in the "glory of their African crown."⁵⁵ This crown is made of what are commonly called dreadlocks. For the Rastafari, the wearing of locks institutes or represents a change within the wearer. This change facilitates an external transformation that has transitioned their hair from the oppression of Babylon, through perms, presses, scissors, and the like, to the free and natural state that Black hair will thrive in if left alone. This outward change is supposedly representative of an internal change within the mind of the Rasta believer.

There are many scholarly suggestions as to where the earliest Rastafari got the idea to view the wearing of locks as righteously liberatory. Barry Chevannes posits that they only became sacramentalized by the Youth Black Faith faction of the Nyabinghi Order in the 1950s.⁵⁶ Chevannes contends that they began to wear locks in order to be viewed as deviants and instill a sense of dread in the minds of the common citizenry and the Babylon authorities.⁵⁷ I agree with this to an extent but feel this explanation must be given some nuance. It was not done merely to

⁵⁵ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 107.

⁵⁶ Barry Chevannes, "The Origin of Dreadlocks," in *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, ed. Barry Chevannes (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 1997, 77-79.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 77-96.

promote a deviant identity and sense of dread amongst the majority of Jamaican society, but to separate oneself from the ways of Babylon. My own interactions with Rasta elders of various houses or sects have led me to believe that separation from Babylon was the more important cause. Some Rastas teach that Jah will pull them up by their locks to remove them during the time of Judgement. If Babylon considered them deviants, so be it. Dianne Stewart agrees with Chevannes in believing that dreadlocks, as well as I-talk and the sacramental use of ganja, were not present in the religion at its inception. She posits that these phenomena came along shortly thereafter in the 1940s.⁵⁸ However, she does not imply that a desired deviant identity was a reason for their wear. Perhaps the earliest scholar to show interest in Rastafari, George Simpson, agrees; however, Simpson dates these phenomena even later. Simpson states that according to his ethnographic studies, none of these, nor the now ever-present Rastafari drumming were present at more than minimal levels as late as 1953.⁵⁹ Both Ennis Edmonds and Horace Campbell postulate that after Rastas in the YBF saw pictures of Kenya's Land and Freedom Army, better known as Mau-Mau warriors, they began to don the dreadlocked hairstyle that has come to practically define the religion for some.⁶⁰

Some Rastafari link locks to the Maasai warriors. Scholars Ajai and Laxmi Masingh claim that the Rastafari picked the wearing of locks up from East India.⁶¹ Most Rastafari link them to ancient Africa and the Nazarite vow of Numbers 6. Dreadlocks do hold an essential role

⁵⁸ Stewart, Dianne, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 121.

⁵⁹ Simpson, George Eaton. "Personal Reflections on Rastafari in West Kingston in the early 1950s," in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 218.

⁶⁰ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 95.

⁶¹ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 107-108.

in Ghanaian culture, both as a symbol and a fragment of regalia. There is a direct link to Africa through the *okemfo* of the Fulani. The *okemfo* wear dreadlocks. This signifies the wearer is a priest/priestess.⁶² Likewise, the locks signify a Rasta, particularly before the wearing of locks became a recreational hairstyle for most who wear it.

The history of dreadlocks, the physical wearing of them, and the symbolism that they utilize all work together to be a vehicle to marronage when it comes to the freeing of the mind of the Rasta adherent. Dreadlocks shattered the traditional grooming norms of colonial Jamaica. Even if not intentional, surely the hairstyle evoked dread amongst both whites and Black people in society. They made a link between the so-called acceptable hairstyles, textures, and methods of grooming with the deification of whiteness through the imagery of a blue-eyed, straight-haired Jesus Christ.⁶³ Locks were not just a source of pride; they were also integral in making meaning out of an oft rejected Africanness, signaling a mark of victory over the British desire to squash African culture in colonial Jamaica. According to the Rastafari, it is the proliferation of British culture that drove the mental enslavement of the Jamaican people. Dreadlocks represent the fight against the artificialness present in Babylon, particularly, as seen by the Rastafari, through the straightening of hair.⁶⁴

Dreadlocks would come to “marry blackness to positive attributes...[and] render white stigmatic conceptions of Blacks impotent.”⁶⁵ Rastafari ideology proclaims the nature of Black

⁶²Jerusha Rhodes, " Fufuo, Dreadlocks, Chickens and Kaya: Practical Manifestations of Traditional Ashanti Religion," *African Diaspora ISPs*, no. 28, (1996): 23-24.

⁶³ Bedasse, Monique, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 29.

⁶⁴ Edmonds, Ennis B. "Dread "I" In-a-Babylon: Ideological Resistance and Cultural Revitalization," in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 32.

⁶⁵ Cashmore, Ernest, *Rastaman: The Rastafarian Movement in England* (Boston: Unwin Paperbacks, 1983), 158.

people is divine.⁶⁶ I feel that this is visually manifested through the wearing of locks. It links the natural state of Black hair to their divinity, thus linking Africa itself with divinity. To Africanize the body is further external, visible proclamation that the wearer is linked to both Jah and Africa. In a 1996 interview, Ras Boagernes, also known as Bongo Watto, one of the original Youth Black Faith members said that the locks mark them as set apart and different, away from the standards of Babylon. He states that locks are “not a hairstyle” [but]...a reality to rise our people, rise ourselves from the hands of our enemy.”⁶⁷ He believes that lock wearers are here to edify others through their lives and their precepts. Rasta women may be considered the most excellent example of this. The wearing of locks went against nearly all sentiments at the time about what a Black woman’s hair should look like. As Obiagele Lake asserts, Black women are pressured to straighten their hair as a means to approximate European models. She believes that Black women are under a twofold system of oppression in this manner due to the fact that not only whites, but many Black people also devalue Black women’s beauty, particularly when she is accentuating Africanness.⁶⁸ For a woman to take on locks was truly a bold statement.

Slavery and its aftermath have left undeniable damage to the collective self-esteem of Black people in the West. For the Rastafari, identification with the lion became a way to mend this damage. The lion offered symbolism that spoke to the strength of Black people.⁶⁹ Dennis Forsyte, when discussing the strivings of the Rastafari, considers that many of those strivings

⁶⁶ Stewart, Dianne, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 133.

⁶⁷ Dominik Frühwirth, “Dreadlocks explained by Rastafari Ancient Ras Boanerges / Bongo Watto,” video, 7:47, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvJ4_sTOz78, 3:36.

⁶⁸ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 107.

⁶⁹ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 99.

were the pining for freedom, the freedom that the African lion represented.⁷⁰ In some regards, the wearing of dreadlocks by the Rastafari is a sort of psychological, guerilla warfare. The “identification with the *lion*... its roar, its hair, its body strength, intelligence”⁷¹ are all symbolically used to give strength to the Rastafari and to set them as the vanguard for the Black race. Noel Erskine recounts an interaction with Brother Tafioritta. He wore locks because, for him, the look created a resemblance to the lion. He felt this to be empowering. For him locks helped “shake off the legacy of slavery and colonialism that told black people they were unimportant, inconsequential, and that their bodies belonged to the master.”⁷²

Campbell and others have detailed histories that describe a mission of law enforcement in the 1950s and 1960s to shear the locks of Rastas. Here was Babylon’s henchmen incarcerating and cutting the hair of Rastas. Although this was a humiliation in itself, the further damage was done in that this disempowered the Rasta in an ideological sense. The Rastafari placed a high importance on the wearing of locks as a way of separating oneself from the rest of society that they deemed to be caught up by Babylon. Although this may not have necessarily affected the Rasta’s fortitude, this would negate the visual display that locks manifest. Part of our identities as humans is informed by the way in which others view us. The cutting of the hair was, in many ways, a negation of the Rasta’s very identity as a person free from Babylon’s mental entrapment. In this environment the wearing of locks was not only a cultural statement, but a stance that involved risk to the wearer’s freedom, livelihood, and life. To merely don the crown of locks was to fight back against Babylon, both the mindset and the cultural construct that set European

⁷⁰ Forsythe, Dennis, " West Indian Culture Through the Prism of Rastafarianism," *Caribbean Quarterly* 26, no. 4, (December 1980): 70-74.

⁷¹ Campbell, 99.

⁷² Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 106-107.

standards as better. Surely this too was a way to escape the mental enslavement that ensnared too many Jamaicans in the eyes of the Rastafari.

RETURN TO ZION: PHYSICAL REPATRIATION

⁵ Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west;

⁶ I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth;

⁷ Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.

Isaiah 43:5-7, King James Version

Repatriation is a must. This phrase is a keynote slogan associated with the Rastafari.

Repatriation may be the expression of the lived religion that is most obviously marronage.

However, several questions must be asked. What exactly is marronage and what do the Rastafari mean when they say it? Is the physical goal of repatriation most important or does true repatriation also require a mental shift? Should a repatriate that returns to Babylon be viewed as a failure, or one who willingly went back into mental slavery? First, I will define what repatriation is and what the Rastafari mean when they use the term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines repatriation as, “The return or restoration of a person to his or her native country.” This, in a sense, is completely right and true. However, it is perhaps my favorite definition of the word, given by Neil Roberts, that lends the most credence to what repatriation means to the Rastafari. He defines it as “the physical and psychic modes of acquiring freedom either never experienced or lost.”⁷³ I would argue that this could also be the definition of

⁷³ Roberts, Neil, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 177.

marronage. However, when strictly applied to repatriation, this definition speaks directly to the acquisition of freedom, the escape from Babylon that the Rastafari long for.

Repatriation is a concept centuries in the making, crafting a certain way to heal post chattel slavery and colonization.⁷⁴ The first Jamaicans who repatriated to Africa were the Maroons who were sent to Nova Scotia after the Second Maroon War.⁷⁵ They had to physically engage in battle in order to make it back to their homeland. It is that same determination to return to Africa that inspired early Rasta leaders to hold fast to repatriation. Marcus Garvey stated in one of his most popular catchphrases, “Africa for the Africans, at home and abroad.”⁷⁶ For some Rastas, they are Africans who are lost in the wilderness of the West. They became maroons the moment that they rejected Jamaican identity for an African one. However, until they have fulfilled grand marronage, they feel a sense of longing for the true home of Black people, especially the Rastafari. For the Rastafari understand their Jamaican existence as being one of disconnectedness.⁷⁷

In 1922, when he was still called His Highness Ras Tafari, the man who would become the god of the Rastafari made the following statement at the 1922 Convention in Hill: “Tell the people to come home. Here their race originated and here it can be lifted to its highest plane of usefulness and honor. Assure them of the cordiality with which I invite them back to the homeland particularly those qualified to help solve our big problem.”⁷⁸ This would become much

⁷⁴ Bonacci, Giulia, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, and Elikia M'Bokolo, *Exodus!: Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia* (Kingston, JA: The University of the West Indies Press, 2015), 2-3.

⁷⁵ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 213.

⁷⁶ Bonacci, Alou, and M'Bokolo, 43.

⁷⁷ Bedasse, Monique, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1.

⁷⁸ Niaah, Jalani, "Absent Father(s), Garvey's Scattered Children & the Back to Africa Movement," *Ìrìnkèrindò: A Journal of African Migration*, no.2, (December 2003): 1.

more of a profound statement in the following years, after Marcus Garvey had told Jamaicans to look to Africa for a redeeming king, and the earliest Rastafari, like Leonard Howell and Mortimer Planno, had begun creating the tenets of the Rastafari faith. Scholars like George E. Simpson and Leonard Barrett have written that physical repatriation was always the intention amongst the Rastafari.⁷⁹ However, others, including D.A. Dunkley, in his “The Politics of Repatriation and the First Rastafari, 1932-1940”, argue in direct refutation of the aforementioned scholars. They contend that physical repatriation was not the priority. In this article, Dunkley’s position is that Leonard Howell was a proponent of “psychological repatriation”⁸⁰ over a physical sort. This is important because some consider Howell the first Rastafari. Howell hailed His Imperial Majesty as the returned Christ, but he also felt that he could maintain physical residence in Jamaica, while under Selassie’s leadership and maintain kinship with the king and the land. According to Dunkley, Howell did not treat repatriation as a physical occurrence even in his book, *The Promised Key*.⁸¹ The major push to see physical repatriation came after 1940.⁸² This push was fueled by a number of different influences including the abject poverty of many Jamaicans and the frequency of political violence; particularly against the poor, collectively known as *the sufferers*. The major catalyst for this push, however, was a crushing population upheaval that took place beginning around 1943. It would go on for nearly three decades. During this time, the bauxite industry began a campaign of displacing poor Jamaicans in efforts to procure more land to mine. This upheaval, the largest movement of people on the island since the days of slavery, removed nearly 600,000 poor Jamaicans from their ancestral lands in order to

⁷⁹ Dunkley, D.A., "The Politics of Repatriation and the First Rastafari, 1932-1940," *Soul* 20, no. 2, (April-June 2018): 183.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 179.

manufacture increased financial gains for the bauxite industry, at the expense of those who were the island's most vulnerable.⁸³

In a 1966 speech made during his visit to Jamaica, Selassie reportedly said that Jamaicans and Ethiopians were blood brothers.⁸⁴ Certainly this would have emboldened the minds of the Rastafari. These were God's words chosen for them, at that time. However, it was not all divine revelation that led to a swift acceptance of repatriation being a physical necessity. Repatriation became a key element of the Rastafari body of knowledge due mainly to two distinct events: the 500-acre land grant given by Haile Selassie I in 1948, and the population destruction and rearrangement caused by the bauxite industry. Rural Jamaicans had been removed from their land in high numbers and shipped out to England or dropped into Kingston ghettos. It is no wonder that the land grant in Shashamane, in Ethiopia's Shoa Province, began to look even more enticing to the most often poor Rastafari.⁸⁵ It is also understandable how a group of Black people who formed a mental, some say spiritual, attachment to Africa, could view the continent as a heaven. Africa was a place of Black kings and queens, in stark contrast to that era's Jamaican society, where they were seen, even by middle-class Blacks as being derelicts and the lowest rung of the social ladder.⁸⁶

As such, repatriation is certainly a means of marronage for the Rastafari. It has been a vehicle for physical freedom since the religion's early days. Labelling a move to Africa as repatriation, rather than immigration or migration, is explained by the Rasta ideology that was

⁸³ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 3.

⁸⁴ Bonacci, Giulia, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, and Elikia M'Bokolo, *Exodus!: Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia* (Kingston, JA: The University of the West Indies Press, 2015), 180.

⁸⁵ Campbell, 222.

⁸⁶ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 177.

clearly stated by Rasta singer Peter Tosh in his 1977 hit, “African:” “no matter where you come from, as long as you’re a Black man, you’re an African.” These lyrics completely explain how the Rastafari situate themselves in the global scope.⁸⁷ Although the realities of repatriation differ from person to person, the act of performing grand marronage by physically leaving Babylon and repatriating is held as a sacred act. Scholar Monique Bedasse, whose 2017 work, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization*, is considered the preeminent work about the Tanzanian repatriate community, worded a description of this wonderfully when she stated that the journey of repatriation is “at its core a renewal of self: the physical act of a spiritual, psychological, and epistemological shift.”⁸⁸ This makes it a transformative vehicle for the adherent’s very sense of being.

Although the Rastafari ideology positions Africa, especially Ethiopia as Zion, repatriation has been a far cry from the Promised Land in many ways. That being stated, it is still an example of marronage and claimed freedom. I posit that showing and analyzing the realities of repatriation are the best ways to present Rastafari as a method of marronage. Marronage, being an escape journey, is not so much about a particular destination as it is about what one undertakes to get there despite insurmountable odds. Often a land that would be staked out as the ground level start to what would become grand marronage was rough, rocky, and uninviting. These lands were often disputed by indigenous people or other groups of maroons. Many of the problems that come along with grand marronage throughout history also presented themselves in the Rastafari’s promised Land. Giulia Bonacci, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, and Elikia M'Bokolo give a brilliant analysis of the problems specifically facing Shashamane in their work, *Exodus!:*

⁸⁷ Bedasse, Monique, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia. Here, I will discuss some of the realities that confront the Rastafari in Shashamane and other repatriation zones across the continent.

In all honesty, by many accounts, Shashamane hit its peak in the closing days of 1970.⁸⁹ Even early on, there were reports of limited land availability, the possibilities of transportation deficiencies, and limited prospects for repatriates.⁹⁰ From the onset, there were real-world problems plaguing Shashamane, regardless of whether there was any truth in the Rastafari's insistence that Ethiopia is Zion. "Ethnic" tensions arose as splits occurred between the predominately Jamaican Rastafari and Black Americans who had taken King Selassie up on his offer. Many early Rastas in Shashamane had been city-dwellers, scantily prepared for the off-the-grid lifestyle that was carving out a home in Shashamane.⁹¹ Scholar and political activist Horace Campbell believes that repatriation is a right for all African descendants, but also that "in light of the transformations induced by the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974, the return to Ethiopia is a conservative and even a colonial expedient contrary to the interests of African people."⁹² This may seem hypocritical until one realizes that the land grant of Shashamane was given by a leader who fell out of favor and was toppled by a coup. The initial repatriates came into a different country than those who came since 1974.

As historical maroons faced opposition from neighboring competitors, so too did those who repatriated to Shashamane. In 1975, after the Dergue (Derg), also known as the Provisional Military Administrative Council, had ousted Haile Selassie I and nationalized Ethiopia's rural

⁸⁹ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 224.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁹² Bonacci, Giulia, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, and Elikia M'Bokolo, *Exodus!: Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia* (Kingston, JA: The University of the West Indies Press, 2015), 7.

land, Shashamane's poor citizenry commandeered the farming equipment, property, and resources of the Rastafari repatriates. It was the Rastafari's continued support for Haile Selassie that had soured the locals on them.⁹³ In like manner, the Oromo see His Imperial Majesty as problematic; thus, Rastafari support for him has caused the Oromo to view the Rastafari with suspicion. Most Ethiopians see them as "ferenjoch", foreign. This has caused many who came to return to the places from whence they came. As of 2014, there were only about 800 Rastas around Shashamane, and a few in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar.⁹⁴ Recent war in Ethiopia has made things even more harrowing for many Rastas. It has been reported that the Shashamane grant is under political tension. Recent years have seen more seizing of Rasta lands, as well as attacks on Rastafari community members and destruction or theft of Rastafari property, particularly on days considered holy for them.⁹⁵

The events of 1975 caused some Rastas in Shashamane to uproot and seek refuge in other places on the continent.⁹⁶ Repatriation zones have sprung up throughout Africa. Ghana became a popular destination. One of those places was also Tanzania, where Rastas began repatriating in 1976. Before Bedasse's stellar work about the Tanzanian repatriate community, little had been written of them.⁹⁷ The Tanzanian community, whose philosophy has been validated by the Tanzanian government,⁹⁸ may be the most successful by some measures. The Tanzanian Rasta community's success is under study. There seems to be myriad reasons why the community has

⁹³ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 226-229.

⁹⁴ Chris Summers, "The Rastafarians' Flawed African 'Promised Land'," BBC News, September 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28059303>.

⁹⁵ "Why Ethiopia's Rastafari Community Keeps Dwindling," dw.com, September 9, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-ethiopia-rastafari-community-keeps-dwindling/a-50339635>.

⁹⁶ Campbell, 226-230.

⁹⁷ Bedasse, Monique, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

seemingly thrived more than the original repatriation site in Ethiopia. First, there was already a receptive population for the Rasta message. A number of indigenous Africans, some of higher socioeconomic status, accepted the call to Rastafari. This would help to spearhead changes in the relationship between Tanzanian society and their new Jamaican neighbors. I posit that not being separated in a particular area like Shashamane but being more assimilated into the rest of the community may have also helped to facilitate a more successful reception. Another major factor in their success happened in 1995 when the Tanzanian government classified the Mbigiri Rasta community as a nongovernmental organization (NGO). The Mbigiri Rastas were in the middle of a push to return from urban areas to farmlands. The Jamaican Rasta's ideas of return to the source were seen as being akin to what they wanted. The Mbigiri Rastas also believed that the Jamaican Rastas represented "*ujamaa*, the nationalist socialist platform that originated in Tanzania."⁹⁹ This would eventually lead to the Tanzanian government granting the Rastafari with chance to, debatably, realize "the most elusive of Rastafarian dreams."¹⁰⁰ The Shashamane community never received such respect from the government, even when Haile Selassie was alive.

Is the physical goal of repatriation adequate or does true repatriation also require a mental shift? Should a repatriate who returns to Babylon be viewed as a failure, or one who willingly went back into mental slavery? I think history indicates that repatriation requires a mental shift, as Howell and others seemed to acknowledge. If this is the case, is it truly grand marronage, or does mental freedom through the practices of the religion provide the fulfillment of grand marronage? I do not believe that a Rasta who returns to Babylon has failed or necessarily gone

⁹⁹ Bedasse, Monique, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 182-185.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

back into mental slavery. It seems to be mental state is what matters the most when it comes to modern marronage. Rasta founder Leonard Howell may agree with this sentiment. From the perspective of mental enslavement, is the practice of the lived religion as a means of marronage by removing the Babylonian mentality actually grand marronage? The remnants or traces of Babylon seem to cling to the Rastafari who have returned to Zion. I agree with Campbell when he states, “even as Rastas, the brethren and sistren could not easily rise above those negative values they had internalized in capitalist Jamaica.”¹⁰¹

Bonacci and her team dispute noted scholar of Rastafari Barry Chevannes’s implications of a stark, barely existent history of physical repatriation. The truth is that there is a rich and active history of repatriation among the Rastafari. It is on that point that I disagree with Chevannes. However, Chevannes sees repatriation as more theological or millenarian, and not so much as an act to be practiced or undergone.¹⁰² It is at this point in his argument about repatriation where I, in part agree, as many Rastas are reconsidering physical repatriation—at least as the ultimate goal.¹⁰³ So, why would a Rasta not want to physically repatriate? Professor Noel Erskine posits that it may, for some, come from an idea that became more reinforced amongst the Rastafari after the release of the University Report. That idea was that of the “Africanization of Jamaica.”¹⁰⁴ Many contemporary Jamaican Rastas see Africa as home, but Jamaica as a step on the journey toward complete freedom. They could be maroons as soon as they took the steps of mental repatriation. They marvel themselves as sojourners camping out in

¹⁰¹Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 226.

¹⁰² Bonacci, Giulia, Antoinette Tidjani Alou, and Elikia M'Bokolo, *Exodus!: Heirs and Pioneers, Rastafari Return to Ethiopia* (Kingston, JA: The University of the West Indies Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁰³ Roberts, Neil, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 180-181.

¹⁰⁴ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 78.

the West Indies until they reach home. They see their first duty as keeping the campsite clean. This may very well be true. It is said that the phrase “liberation before repatriation”¹⁰⁵ was directed to the Rastafari by His Imperial Majesty during his famous 1966 state visit to Jamaica. This could be interpreted to mean that one needs to have mental freedom before repatriation.¹⁰⁶

Horace Campbell seems critical of the Rastafari repatriates who support Haile Selassie I, stating, “Rastas cannot be against Babylon in the West and support reaction in Africa.”¹⁰⁷ I envision the Rasta stance differently due to the fact that the reaction he referred to was the Rastafari practice of putting up pictures of Haile Selassie I.¹⁰⁸ He considered this reaction because, although the display of Selassie’s picture was a way of pushing back against Westernized societal norms in Jamaica, it was contrary to the will of mainstream Ethiopians who were already embattled with a Communist dictatorship. Despite wanting to rid themselves of a dictatorship, they had no desire to return to the monarchy that Selassie represented or the crushing feudal system that accompanied it. For the purpose of this paper, I will consider the displaying of Selassie’s picture as merely an example of lived religion and not a reactionary action. While I do understand Campbell’s critique of the repatriation efforts of the Rastafari, I think they should be viewed as they are for the Rastafari, a sincere display of their love for their god. While I do not subscribe to every facet of Campbell’s or Erskine’s analysis of repatriation, I agree with Erskine’s “claim that any responsible view of repatriation must include liberation.”¹⁰⁹ Now we must ask the question as to whether Rastafari can truly be liberative for all its adherents.

¹⁰⁵ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 79.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁰⁷ Campbell, Horace, *Rasta and Resistance: from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 229.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Erskine, 127.

IS RASTAFARI MARRONAGE FOR WOMEN?

As I have stated, the lived religious experiences, practices, and ideology of the Rastafari function as marronage, methods of flight from the clutches of “Babylon” or captivity. However, to many, there appears a hypocrisy within this religion that espouses liberation. For them, Rastafari contains a disturbing underbelly. It has been asserted that women often lack the freedoms acquired by male adherents, seemingly being subject to merely holding gendered roles, usually of servitude or as child-bearers. For this reason, some feel that to label Rastafari as a method of marronage would be, in fact, a misnomer. Although I do not discount the fact that women do face subjugation within the Rastafarian community, I contend that the religion may still be considered as a method of marronage, not only for males, but also their female counterparts. This is because the “mental slavery” that adherents to the religion are seeking to escape is based in Eurocentric, Christian ideology and practices that sought to erase the Africanized mind from those who were taken from the continent and brought into Western captivity. These ideologies and practices essentially made Black people non-beings and gave a religious sanction for it to happen. This type of marronage, as Neil Roberts states in his 2015 book, *Freedom as Marronage*, “is a flight from zones of non-being to zones of refuge.”¹¹⁰ Rastafari, as a vehicle of Black liberation, though tainted by the remnants of Babylon, is still a refuge. The overwhelming majority of the subjugation that women in the religion face comes from holdovers of the Eurocentric, patriarchal interpretations of religious text that have made their way into Rastafari ideology and practice. These are not part of the so-called “livity”¹¹¹ of Rastafari but are trappings of Babylon that some individuals cannot seem to relinquish.

¹¹⁰ Roberts, Neil, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 119.

¹¹¹ Livity essentially means the Rastafarian lifestyle; one in accordance with the principles that are manifest in the ideology of the religion.

However, the foundation of the religion is, and has always been, about liberation for both the sons and daughters of Africa.

Rastafari inherited all the convolutions of “gender and family relations”¹¹² shared by the majority of Jamaican society. Many of these were due to the influence that conservative Christian culture had, particularly during the early 20th century. Christianity has always been a powerful force that has maintained a grip on Jamaican social norms, including the daily existences of women, particularly regarding their socialization and conduct. It considerably affected male-female interactions and modified community norms and expectations, for example, in relation to childbearing and marriage.¹¹³ This did much in regulating so-called acceptable and decent social identities. It was this conservative religious culture that sought to maintain the “colonial and neocolonial”¹¹⁴ social formations that were viably present in Jamaican society. The major most substantial method of maintaining these structures was to create and maintain an intensely heteropatriarchal society that used heteropatriarchal ideas to create and maintain laws that would reinforce the heteropatriarchy.¹¹⁵ It was this heteropatriarchy that unfortunately would definitely play a factor in Rasta ideology pertaining to women. Yes, it is a system of liberation. However, like any social system, there are flaws or discrepancies. Some scholars of Rastafari, including Barry Chevannes, one of the world’s foremost scholarly authorities on the religion, believe that the religion is male dominated and places women of all ages below males of any age, as far as social status is concerned, and that women must always defer their will to those of the

¹¹² Maureen Rowe, “Gender and Family Relations in Rastafari: A Personal Perspective,” in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 75.

¹¹³ Senior, Olive, *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean* (London: Currey, 1991), 185.

¹¹⁴ Lazarus, Latoya, "This is a Christian Nation: Gender and Sexuality in Processes of Constitutional and Legal Reform in Jamaica," *Social and Economic Studies* 61, no.3, (September 2012): 118.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

men.¹¹⁶ Other scholarly critiques have insisted that Rastafari is all about the redemption and liberation of the Black man. These scholars indicate that the woman has seemingly been erased from the narrative of freedom.¹¹⁷ It has even been insinuated that Rastafari may even be considered a tool used for the oppression of women. It is sometimes stated that the Rasta woman simply knows no better and has become complicit in her own oppression by internalizing it.¹¹⁸

In her 1998 book, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology*, Obiagele Lake became one of the first and few Rasta woman scholars who has come out with sharp critiques of the religion. She contends that patriarchy is part of the fundamental Rasta ideology and that within the religion itself, women are marginalized and placed in subordinate positions. Rasta women like herself, she feels, make up the minority. She ponders whether it is feasible to credit Rastafari as being a source of liberation when women adherents are forced into subordinate status. She does not find it surprising that Rasta men who profess African liberation are likewise caught in a web of sexist behavior patterns. She cites the Rastafari as, perhaps, the guiltiest of any African liberation-based religion in this respect.¹¹⁹ Lake believes that in the Rastafari religion, “women are doubly oppressed compared to other Jamaican women,”¹²⁰ and that the Rastafari’s stance is “anathema to the idea of freedom.”¹²¹ In her opinion, Rasta women are uniquely situated to be subjected to both Western and Africanized patriarchy.

¹¹⁶ Chevannes, Barry, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 176-177.

¹¹⁷ Alhassan, Shamara Wyllie, " Rastafari Women's 'Black Girl Magic' in the Pan-African World," *National Political Science Review*, 19.2, (2018): 70.

¹¹⁸ Goldson, Randy R., "Liberating the Mind: Rastafari and the Theorization of Maroonage as Epistemological (Dis) Engagement," *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no.4, (2020): 376.

¹¹⁹ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 3.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

What is patriarchy? The *Encyclopedia of Black Studies* defines it as “an authoritative male system that is both oppressive and discriminatory.”¹²² It goes on to say that “patriarchy is grounded in the assumption that the individual European male is a universal reference point and the source of defining visions of the cosmos, society, citizenship, and the individual self within hierarchal concepts of gender, race, and class relations.”¹²³ For many in the diaspora, especially those who are believers in some form of liberation theology, patriarchy is not seen as being Afrocentric or a historically African phenomenon. While it appears true that patriarchy does exist in African societies, many scholars suggest one of two ideas. The first idea is that patriarchy did exist in Africa but is distinctly different from European patriarchy in that it was not based on control and wealth. These scholars posit that an Africanized patriarchy drew “its authority from the fact of maleness.”¹²⁴ As Rasta woman and scholar Maureen Rowe states, “The male person has a peculiar value from which his power and authority flow...The male in this context would have a value assigned to him by the female”¹²⁵ in a family structure. She asserts that women actually empowered men by assigning them a value based on the woman’s value of children. If a male showed virility, he may be willingly given a position of empowerment.¹²⁶ This was markedly distinct from the Europeanized patriarchy that saw women as the property of the man. The second idea is that the form we see in its present state is the byproduct of European influence. These scholars insist that patriarchy was not inherently an African way of life at all. This idea is akin to the definition given above. This is part of the reason why many Rasta

¹²² Ana Monteiro Ferreira, “Patriarchy,” in *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*, ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Mambo Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications), 2005, 395.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Maureen Rowe, “Gender and Family Relations in Rastafari: A Personal Perspective,” in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 73.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

women, who may seemingly be subject to patriarchal inequalities, suggest that patriarchy is “of Babylon” and not truly part of Rastafari livity.

As I have stated, I insist that Rastafari is a method of modern marronage. However, I would be remiss if I did not point out the fact that there is an element of subjugation that women within the religion face. There are two forms of subjugation that may be at work in the lives of Rasta women. The first, I call theoretical subjugation. This comes in the form of theological, discursive, and textual aspects that influence the thought processes of both Rasta men and Rasta women. Many of these are based in biblical or other religious doctrines and theological superstitions. Many critics within the religion blame Eurocentric ideology that has seeped into Rastafari discourse. The second is the practice of subjugation in day-to-day life. These are the activities that suppress women through action. I will present the theoretical method of subjugation first, since it is what fuels subjugating practices.

Many Rastafari feel that the reliance on traditional biblical interpretations is to continue to follow the ideology of Babylon in some respects. They postulate that ideas such as menstrual impurity and Eve being the “mother of evil” are Anglo-Saxon in origin.¹²⁷ In *The Promised Key*, a primary sacred text of Rastafari, Leonard P. Howell, considered to be the first Rasta, called the Bible “fake.”¹²⁸ Nonetheless, the Bible and much of the Europeanized theology common in Jamaica would eventually find a home in Rastafari’s ideological canon. One of the key Bible passages that has been used to justify the subjugation of women in the Rastafari religion has been Ephesians 5:22-24. This is the notoriously famous passage that begins, “Wives submit yourselves to your husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife...” This

¹²⁷ Howell, Leonard Percival, *The Promised Key* (Los Angeles: Orunmilla, Inc., 2015), 39.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

has given wide-reaching authority for some males in the religion to exercise dominance over women in the religion, especially their wives, placing them in a diminutive role. Most of the theoretical subjugation that is present in Rastafari begins with the biblical narrative. Oftentimes, verses have been cherrypicked and utilized to control women's bodies. These theological interpretations range from ideas constructed around how women should dress (Deuteronomy 22:5 and I Timothy 2:9-10) to explanations of female purity (Leviticus 11:1-15:33). A great deal of emphasis has been placed on female purity in many Rastafari sects, or houses as they are known. The perception of female impurity, whether or not due to menstruation, is embodied not only in many traditional Christian theologies, but also in African indigenous beliefs. It is understandings of texts such as these that establish "the theoretical basis for the subordination of Rastafarian women."¹²⁹

These methods of theoretical subjugation do much to inform actual practices that may be subjugating to women. It is these real-world practices that draw the heaviest scrutiny from critics of the religion. In this chapter, I will focus on several areas of practice that have been deemed particularly unbalanced when it comes to the rights of women. The first area is that of household duties and station. One of the criticisms of Rastafari is that the women are often relegated to roles seen as subordinate, such as homemaker or the bearer of children.¹³⁰ This has led some to insist that Rasta women are held in a state of financial imprisonment since their husbands may not allow them to work outside of the home.¹³¹ Even reggae star Judy Mowatt, who came to fame as one of Bob Marley's I-Threes, has suggested that some Rasta men did not like

¹²⁹ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 94.

¹³⁰ *Omega Rising: Women in Rastafari*, directed by D. Elmina Davis (Independent Cinema Office, 1988), online, 38:48.

¹³¹ Tsholofelo Masetshaba Mosala, "Lived Experiences of Rastafari Women in Tshwane, South Africa: An Anthropological Perspective" (master's diss., University of South Africa, 2017), 93-94.

assertiveness in women. In an interview for the 1988 film *Omega Rising: Women in Rastafari*, perhaps the first such film to delve specifically into the female representation within Rastafari, she stated, “I was confronted at all times about women must not do this and women must not do that.”¹³² She credits her husband with giving her the morale boost that she needed to continue chasing her career dreams.¹³³

Another area of subjugating practice comes in the form of dress codes. Rasta women are often given guidelines on how to dress. As detailed earlier, these come oftentimes directly from the biblical narrative. Although there are variations, the common dress code that most houses of Rastafari share are as follows: women should wear long skirts or dresses, they should wear minimal or no makeup, and they are to cover their heads by either a headwrap or turban.¹³⁴ In the Boboshanti community, the house typically regarded as the most conservative or the most oppressive, depending on who is commenting, women must completely cover their heads, arms, and legs, regardless of the weather or temperature.¹³⁵ While it is true that most Rastafari wear locks, often called dreadlocks; it is only the women who are expected to keep them covered in public. The Boboshanti are the only house to differ in that typically all members wear their locks always covered by a turban in public, although occasionally Bobo men may be seen without the turban.¹³⁶

The next area where subjugating practices are said to occur is in the practice of worship. Although atypical at present, for years, women were not permitted to speak during worship

¹³² *Omega Rising: Women in Rastafari*, 32:14.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Tsholofelo Masetshaba Mosala, “Lived Experiences of Rastafari Women in Tshwane, South Africa: An Anthropological Perspective” (master’s diss., University of South Africa, 2017), 91-92.

¹³⁵ Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 111.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

services in many Rastafari houses. They could not approach the altar, known as the Rainbow Circle Throne and offer hymns, chants, or ises (praises), although they were welcome to offer such at some distance away from the altar.¹³⁷ They certainly were not allowed to preach or give spoken testimony in a mix gendered assembly. In some houses, women were not permitted to engage in any form of singing.¹³⁸ It should be noted that the Boboshanti have produced many reggae and dancehall music stars since the early 1990s. However, none have been women. Even in their recorded churchical chants (worship music) one only hears male voices in song.

As I stated earlier, most practices that subjugate women in Rastafari are rooted in biblical narratives. One of the most glaring examples of one of these practices comes in relation to the treatment of menstruating women. These practices are often seen as a way of dealing with pollution. Pollution, in this sense, relates to femininity. There is a belief, again inspired by the biblical narrative, that women may pollute men “though their bodily substances and through their overall femaleness.”¹³⁹ Perhaps the most controversial example of this comes from the House of the Boboshanti Order. During a time before their menstrual cycle, during their cycle, and for a time afterwards, Bobo women are considered unclean and forced to live in their own domiciles, away from their families. They are sequestered for most of the year. The first day of the menstrual cycle is counted as day one. A Bobo woman may not “be seen or heard until the 21st day, the end of purification.”¹⁴⁰ This unique system of exclusion causes an oddity that exists amongst the Boboshanti that does not exist amongst any other Rasta house. Since they are forced

¹³⁷ Goldson, Randy R., " Liberating the Mind: Rastafari and the Theorization of Maroonage as Epistemological (Dis) Engagement," *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no.4, (2020): 376.

¹³⁸ Mosala, 93-94.

¹³⁹ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 95.

¹⁴⁰ Ethiopian Africa Black International Congress Church of Salvation, *Newsletter* (Bull Bay, JA: Ethiopian Africa Black International Congress Church of Salvation, n.d.), mimeograph, quoted in Obiagele Lake, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 97.

to quarantine inside private domiciles away from all others during this purification period, women have amnesty from most domestic work.¹⁴¹ As Erskine notes, contrary to most of Jamaican society, it is the men, not the women who cook and serve. Women are not allowed to cook for Bobo men at all and are only allowed to cook for outside men when they are not under the purification exclusionary period.¹⁴² This ban from most household duties even applies to most of the childcare. It should be noted that though the days of uncleanness are significantly less, men are also considered unclean for a period after ejaculating.¹⁴³ During the actual period of menstruation, a red flag is raised above the home/shack in which the woman is residing. This is to serve as notice that blood is present, and this home is impure.¹⁴⁴ Some see this as hypocrisy. The attributes that make her sacred as a Rasta empress, representative of the Queen Omega principle, the principle that considers Rasta women to be deemed royalty beside the kingman (Rasta man) and as the “mother of civilization”¹⁴⁵ are the same attributes that cause her to be profane or bring her shame.

A considerable portion of this chapter has been utilized in detailing some aspects of the practices that supposedly place the Rasta woman in a subordinate position. These perspectives are often, though not always, from an etic viewpoint that is inspired by Western concepts. At times, this Western point of view may seem inherently critical of Rastafari. We cannot neglect the fact that the emic perspective may be different, due to the Rasta woman’s situatedness within the religion and her understanding of the principles or practices many may see as subjugating.

¹⁴¹ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 97.

¹⁴² Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 112.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Coalition to Preserve Reggae Music, “Natural Mystics on Real Talk, March 17, 2016: Women in Rastafari,” March 20, 2016, video, 2:40:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCzi6Bj7xOo>, 52:15.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 2:13.

Aleema Gray, Community History Curator at the Museum of London, puts it another way, as she states that, “quite often, such conclusions were based on Western perceptions of gender equality which silenced the perspectives of Rastafari women.”¹⁴⁶

In the groundbreaking documentary *Omega Rising: Women in Rastafari*, director D. Elmina Davis showcased Rastafari women in the mid-1980s. “Rising” is descriptive of the upward pattern of change for Rasta women that began in the 80s. Even though much of Rasta ideology that developed during the 1960s and 1970s referenced the Bible, many Rastas do not deal with the Bible or choose an Africanized theological lens through which to view it. As social patterns changed, Rasta women have developed their own form of womanism.¹⁴⁷ As scholar Shamara Wyllie Alhassan states, “Rastafari women critique the ways white imperial rule used Christianity and capitalism to develop gender constructs that valued nuclear families over extended kinship networks and gendered private and public space, which led to women’s relegation to the domestic sphere.”¹⁴⁸ Many Rasta women will point out that Empress Menen, the wife of Haile Selassie, was crowned alongside and at the same time as His Imperial Majesty. They feel that this represents the equality that the Rasta woman has with the Rasta man.¹⁴⁹

How did this claim manifest in the real lives of the Rastafari women? When asked about those men who try to keep women in certain gendered or subordinate roles, many Rasta women see them as performing a Eurocentric behavior. A Rasta woman interviewed in *Omega Rising* stated that this is “along the British lines in terms of the woman being totally the property of the

¹⁴⁶ Gray, Aleema. “Aleema Gray on Pioneer Rastafari Filmmaker D. Elmina Davis,” Derek Bishton, 2019, <https://www.derekbishton.com/aleema-gray-on-pioneer-rastafari-filmmaker-d-elmina-davis/>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Alhassan, Shamara Wyllie, " Rastafari Women's 'Black Girl Magic' in the Pan-African World," *National Political Science Review*, 19.2, (2018): 71.

¹⁴⁹ *Omega Rising: Women in Rastafari*, directed by D. Elmina Davis (Independent Cinema Office, 1988), online, 2:13.

man.”¹⁵⁰ For them, it is a matter of individual thought and European influence. It is not a part of Rasta livity. It is a product of Babylon and they consider those men as not being completely free. In a radio panel interview with the Coalition to Preserve Reggae Music, Rasta woman elder Sistah Cuchy stated that, “It is the colonial mentality. Because someone call dem self Rasta nah mean dem understand the truthfulness of trodding as a Rasta person.”¹⁵¹ This may pose a larger question. When does marronage come if these Rasta men are not yet completely free? It comes as soon as one accepts Rastafari. The yoke of Babylon is broken at that point. As with the maroons of slavery days, freedom came at the moment of escape. However, there was never a set destination of total freedom until the runaway set foot in a land where chattel slavery was outlawed. In some manner, one was always on the run. Although the former slave had escaped the master’s clutches, total freedom would not come until the maroon made it to a sort of Promised Land. For the Rasta, this means either Africa or a mindset completely free of the influences of the Babylon system. These men could be considered to be suffering from the remnants of Babylon still at work in their minds. Yes, they are maroons; but they are not fully healed from the ailments that their former life has left them to suffer with.

Many Rasta women sought Rastafari to escape sexual and societal abuse. The feeling was that Jamaica was harder on women than on men; Rasta was a system to escape this.¹⁵² Sexism, racism, and colorism were rampant in Jamaican society. As grueling as poverty was for many men, the lopsided gender system in Jamaica made the world even more difficult for the poor,

¹⁵⁰ *Omega Rising: Women in Rastafari*, directed by D. Elmina Davis (Independent Cinema Office, 1988), online, 45:48.

¹⁵¹ Coalition to Preserve Reggae Music, “Natural Mystics on Real Talk, March 17, 2016: Women in Rastafari,” March 20, 2016, video, 2:40:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCzi6Bj7xOo>, 29:12.

¹⁵² *Omega Rising: Women in Rastafari*, 22:03.

Black woman. For many Rasta women, “sighting”¹⁵³Rastafari exposed them to better health through “ital”¹⁵⁴ eating, a sense of pride in the Black race, even a sense of royalty due to the way in which they dressed. Many of these women feel Rastafari is a safe space in a world that tends to praise women more for their physical traits and attributes than for the content of their character or intellectual capacity. They fashion themselves after Queen Omega (Empress Menen), considered in Rasta ideology as the feminine aspect of divinity. They claim a status of queenship or goddesshood and often feel that Rastafari has given them the insight that allows them to tap into a reservoir of divine power within themselves. As former model and pageant queen turned Rasta woman Kai Davis stated in a talk that she gave for TEDx Talks, “where people saw poverty and persecution, I saw purity and principle.”¹⁵⁵

These lines of thought are like ideas posited by the Muslim women profiled in Saba Mahmood’s *The Politics of Piety*. Just as many Muslim women are thought to be kept in suppression by the hijab, so too are Rasta women thought to be oppressed by various tenets of their faith. However, according to many Rasta women, this may not be the case. This is where my critique of those who contend that Rastafari cannot be a method of marronage for women comes into play. Scholars, especially those who are outsiders, cannot be quick to condemn certain aspects of a religion as oppressive, as the female adherents may not view those same facets as such. Those scholars cannot utilize only their own ways of understanding, especially if

¹⁵³ “Sighting Rastafari” is the term used by the Rastafari to describe the conversion the adherent makes. The implication is that the adherent now has a special vision of Haile Selassie, seeing him as divine and not how those tricked by “Babylon” view him. When one sights Rastafari, one has decided to live life as a Rasta. This may, in some ways, be seen as the moment the first step is made towards a marronage effort.

¹⁵⁴ Ital food is the Iyahric term for vital food. This food is considered to be natural and necessary for good physical health. Although many Rastas may be vegan or vegetarian, an equally large number, particularly in Jamaica, consider fish with fins and scales to be ital. Another key tenet of truly ital food is that it is cooked without salt.

¹⁵⁵ TEDx Talks, “Spiritual Change - The Journey to Rasta: Kai Davis,” June 22, 2015, video, 15:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn9Zjq9mpkI&pbjreload=101>, 6:31.

those ways are based in Western concepts, in scrutinizing a culture that is foreign to them. The scholar must understand, and also listen, to how those who are being studied view and understand themselves. Randy Goldson, a scholar who has written about marronage and Rastafari states that, “oppression is a matter of ideological positioning.”¹⁵⁶ There are some other features of Rastafari that some, especially scholars outside of the religion, tend to criticize. As scholar Maureen Rowe, a Rasta woman herself, contends, we must be wary of some of those criticisms because they may not be understood as oppressive to the women who “understand, accept, and practice them.”¹⁵⁷

Rasta women fight oppression of women in their own ways of knowing and through their own understanding. They often disregard genitalia in formulating ideas around the concepts of masculine and feminine, preferring to discuss those concepts in terms of male and female energy. Often relinquishing terms like *feminism*, Rasta women tend to look at their battle against patriarchy as a movement towards balance, referring to the balance of male and female energy.¹⁵⁸ Even though it may be evident that feminism and women’s liberation have assisted Rasta women in their upliftment, many Rasta women are put off by the usage of these terms and reject them as such.¹⁵⁹ *Omega Rising* gave a glimpse at the unity, resistance, and resilience, despite the presence of subordination, present in Rasta women.¹⁶⁰ Even Lake concedes that “to say that Rastafarian women are subordinated to men is not [to claim] that they have no agency or

¹⁵⁶ Goldson, Randy R., "Liberating the Mind: Rastafari and the Theorization of Maroonage as Epistemological (Dis) Engagement," *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no.4, (2020): 376.

¹⁵⁷ Rowe, Maureen, "The Woman in Rastafari," *Caribbean Quarterly* 26, no.4, (1980): 14-17.

¹⁵⁸ Alhassan, Shamara Wyllie, "Rastafari Women's 'Black Girl Magic' in the Pan-African World," *National Political Science Review*, 19.2, (2018): 71.

¹⁵⁹Coalition to Preserve Reggae Music, “Natural Mystics on Real Talk, March 17, 2016: Women in Rastafari,” March 20, 2016, video, 2:40:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCzi6Bj7xOo>, 1:04:42.

¹⁶⁰ Gray, Aleema. “Aleema Gray on Pioneer Rastafari Filmmaker D. Elmina Davis,” Derek Bishton, 2019, <https://www.derekbishton.com/aleema-gray-on-pioneer-rastafari-filmmaker-d-elmina-davis/>.

influence, or that they have no personal power. Neither does the claim of women's subordination mean that they do not respect themselves or are not respected in certain ways by the males in the organization."¹⁶¹ She does, in fact, contend that the Rastafari religion is a vehicle of liberation theology.¹⁶² Liberation is synonymous with marronage.

In its earliest years, it was evident that Rastafari was in fact a method of marronage for men, as well as women. Howell was not so tied to the Bible as later Rastas would come to be. Many of the ideological remnants of Babylon had no place in the initial canon. From the 1930s until the early 1950s, women seemed to perform in many ways alongside the men. Jah Bones, an early Rasta elder, notes that women sang songs in the assembly, spoke to men about religious topics, testified to the glory of Haile Selassie in public forums, fought side by side with their men, and even publicly smoked marijuana in the ceremonial chalice. According to a female elder who was alive during those times under Howell, there were "no distinctions made between males and females."¹⁶³ However, this would change once Rastafari believers broke into different houses or so-called camps, under different tutelage, leadership, and instruction. Some, particularly those who aligned with churchical or biblical standards such as the Boboshanti, would come to draw strong distinctions between the genders.

Although gender dynamics has been a point of contention, the overall epistemological foundation of the religion is in the dynamic of Black liberation.¹⁶⁴ Some of the male dominance

¹⁶¹ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 3-4.

¹⁶² Erskine, Noel, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 114.

¹⁶³ Maureen Rowe, "Gender and Family Relations in Rastafari: A Personal Perspective," in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 75.

¹⁶⁴ Goldson, Randy R., "Liberating the Mind: Rastafari and the Theorization of Maroonage as Epistemological (Dis) Engagement," *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no.4, (2020): 376.

began to be asserted as pushback to the widespread influence of the feminist movement of the 1970s.¹⁶⁵ The feminist movement was seen as something that was of Babylon. Even some, if not many, modern Rasta men relent to the fact that during this period of time, the religion was at times extremely rigid in upholding patriarchy.¹⁶⁶ However, in the 80s, for the Rasta woman, a new era began; an era in which they would begin to repossess their own story.¹⁶⁷ What has developed is a sort of “Rastawomanism,” a term coined by scholar Jeanne Christenson.¹⁶⁸ In many ways there is an “old Rastafari” that was heavily subjected to male dominance and a “new Rastafari”, a product of a sort of “Rasta feminism.”¹⁶⁹ This represents a journey towards a complete freedom. This idea is eloquently expressed in the words of a particularly outspoken Rasta sister interviewed by Lake. She stated, “At the end of the day, I’m not fighting for equal opportunity with nobody. Equal to who? I’m fighting for my freedom. And the first step to freedom is freedom of choice.”¹⁷⁰

That is exactly what marronage is. Marronage begins with a choice. Any Rasta woman who has called upon Haile Selassie and adorned her head with her crown of locks has made this choice. That choice is an ideological commitment. Imani M. Tafari-Ama, a Rasta woman scholar, in her essay “Rastawoman as Rebel: Case Studies in Jamaica,” states that “I-an-I remain committed to Rastafari because it is more than having a relationship with a man; it is about having an identity...the authentication of myself as a Black queen, with no apologies to the

¹⁶⁵ Rowe, 81.

¹⁶⁶Goldson, 376.

¹⁶⁷ Gray, Aleema. “Aleema Gray on Pioneer Rastafari Filmmaker D. Elmina Davis,” Derek Bishton, 2019, <https://www.derekbishton.com/aleema-gray-on-pioneer-rastafari-filmmaker-d-elmina-davis/>.

¹⁶⁸ Alhassan, Shamara Wyllie, " Rastafari Women's 'Black Girl Magic' in the Pan-African World," *National Political Science Review*, 19.2, (2018): 71.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Lake, Obiagele, *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the Midst of Liberation Theology* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 110.

norms and ideology of Babylon.”¹⁷¹ Though it indicates a sense of freedom or escape, marronage is flight itself. The maroon of the past often had to make multiple flights in escaping those who would continue to pursue. The Rasta woman has done likewise in a certain sense. She fled Babylon, only to be followed by Babylon’s minions (patriarchy, genderism, sexism). She has continued to resist and take flight towards the goal of complete freedom. In the process, she has informed the religion itself, crafting it into a better representation of marronage and a fulfillment of the initial ideals of Howell and the founders of the faith.

CONCLUSION: HOW RASTAFARI IS MARRONAGE AND WHY IT MATTERS

So, are the Rastafarian the maroons of our present day? I contend that the answer is yes. This is precisely why Neil Roberts set them up as the prime example of the act of marronage in our present day,¹⁷² the perfect example of a “twentieth century maroon movement.”¹⁷³ Although problems and the remnants of Babylon continue to plague them, from Shashamane to Trenchtown, they are forever in flight from the mental enslavement of Babylon. For Goldson, marronage “begins with an ideological commitment.”¹⁷⁴ I do not find this to be the case. Marronage begins with desire—desire to depart desperation. Nettleford called Rastafari one of the New World’s “most authentic expressions of organic revolt in appropriate if anguished

¹⁷¹ Imani M. Tafari-Ama, “Rastawoman as Rebel: Case Studies in Jamaica,” in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, 89.

¹⁷² Roberts, Neil, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 173-181.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁷⁴ Goldson, Randy R., “Liberating the Mind: Rastafari and the Theorization of Maroonage as Epistemological (Dis) Engagement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no.4, (2020): 369.

response to some of the deepest social forces that have shaped and still determine the discussion of Caribbean society.”¹⁷⁵

For the Rastafari, Africa, Zion, is the ultimate ideal. They view Jamaica as only a temporary place of exile. They are maroons en route to Zion. There remains the question of grand marronage or petit marronage. Though Africa is the ultimate goal, the freedom of marronage begins in the mind. Most, in my experience, never completely make it to a fully liberated mental state that is completely free of any ideology attributed to Babylon; but, again, marronage is flight itself. They may never reach a stationary existence, living in what Gary Wilder deems “a situation of precarious autonomy under conditions of asymmetrical interdependence.”¹⁷⁶ Is the lifelong Rasta performing grand marronage? What of repatriates who return, yet continue a Rastafari livity? This thesis cannot answer this in totality, but I conclude that those who are “in the world, but not of the world” may still be capable of complete marronage, since it is both mental and physical. In answering the call of Rev. Webb, Leonard Howell, and Haile Selassie , the Rastafari also answered the call to leave Babylon. Essentially, this was a call to flight, both physically and mentally.

Why does this matter in the present day? For the academy, studying the Rastafari through more contemporary, so-called decolonizing lenses may present a challenge to the ways in which we have approached theory and method. For the general society, the ideas presented in this thesis has greater roles. Since the cultural hip-hop or so-called “knowledge of self” movement arose in the late 1980s, Black youth have been inundated with resistance culture. Although some of the

¹⁷⁵ Owens, Joseph, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (Kingston, JA: Sangster's Book Stores, 1976), 188.

¹⁷⁶ Gary Wilder, “The Promise of Freedom and the Predicament of Marronage: On Neil Roberts's Freedom as Marronage,” *Small Axe*, February 2017, [http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/reviews/promise-freedom-and-predicament-marronage-neil-robertss-freedom-marronage#:~:text=He%20thus%20writes%20of%20a,be%20human%E2%80%9D%20\(116\)](http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/reviews/promise-freedom-and-predicament-marronage-neil-robertss-freedom-marronage#:~:text=He%20thus%20writes%20of%20a,be%20human%E2%80%9D%20(116).).

passion died down with the rise of commercial hip-hop, the rash of police killings in the 21st century caused it to return with bold fervor. We have seen the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. The year 2016 saw the election of Donald Trump. Despite his chosen son status amongst white nationalists and other hate groups, American Evangelicals continued to heavily support him and his platform. All of this has caused contention in the Black community, particularly amongst Black Christians. Many are looking for ways to separate their faith from the Eurocentric and anti-Black culture that permeates much of the American Evangelical movement. Some have found a hope in Rastafari. Other Blacks find hope in the idea of a freedom from the colonizer's creed that has influenced a great part of Western society. This is what the Rastafari have envisioned for themselves. Besides the Rasta rhetoric, there are many spaces of overlap regarding true freedom in the midst of a society that may find the Black body or Black believer contemptible. Perhaps the study of the Rasta idea of marronage may spark an interest amongst the Black, American populace longing for a method of departure, at least mentally, from the madness that is modern American society.

From an ideology that espouses Black divinity to lived practices such as smoking ganja and growing dreadlocks to physical relocation to the Motherland, it is the idea of liberating oneself from Babylon that orders the Rasta's life. For the Rastafari, their waking moments are filled with individually and collectively developing methods and ways to "beat down Babylon." The end goal is freedom: freedom from the mental, and sometimes physical, slavery of Western ideologies, philosophies, and the white supremacist system's systemic structure on which Euro-American society is based. What critics call escapism, the Rastafari call flight.

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