

“I-AND-I VIBRATION”:  
WORD, SOUND, AND POWER IN RASTAFARI MUSIC AND REASONING

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## Abstract

For Rastafarians, *reasoning* is a sacred form of dialogue, an exchange of ideas or “sounds” on matters of faith, identity, or collective goals. The Rastafari movement emerged from the black liberation struggle in Jamaica during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expressing its ideals and desire for repatriation through a unique set of practices: the worship of Haile Selassie I, crowned emperor of Ethiopia in 1930; a style of drumming and chanting known as Nyahbinghi, which blends various African and Jamaican influences with Christian hymnody; the display of red, gold, and green, the colors of the Ethiopian flag; an Africa-inspired hairstyle known as dreadlocks; and the process of reasoning, a conversation in which everyone has an equally important role in the development of Rastafari ideology and *livity* (lifestyle). Also inspired by the movement, reggae music has been instrumental in spreading the message of Rastafari around the world. Central to these Rastafarian musical and verbal performance genres is the concept of *word-sound power*, the idea that the vibrations of speech and music impact the world, both physically and socially. For this reason, the Rastafari manipulate word-sounds to reflect the goals of the movement. The foundational example of this practice is *InI* (I-and-I), which replaces “we” or “us,” expressing the philosophy that all individuals share a common essence with Jah, or God. Drawing from the author’s ethnographic work in Philadelphia and Jamaica, as well as his several years of participation in Philadelphia’s reggae scene, this analysis considers three dimensions of expressive sound in Rastafari: its challenges to social hierarchies and notions of difference; its power as a means of creating and connecting with nature; and its potential for sustaining Rastafari identity and cultural life. This third component brings the analysis into dialogue with the field of cultural sustainability by considering how the performative aspects of ethnography might disrupt or enhance constructions of cultural and physical difference.

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## **Livication**

In Rastafari terms, “dedication” becomes “livication,” for that which is offered to another in love cannot be *ded* (dead). This capstone project is not finished; I consider it a living, breathing work, a gift that has only been in my hands for a short time. While I feel blessed to be able to share it with others, I must first acknowledge that this work is not mine alone, but the fruit of collaboration, ancient wisdom, modern innovation, and a great deal of friendship and patience. I livicate this, my present contribution to an eternal reasoning, to those who have shared much with me.

To my capstone committee: my advisor, Lisa Rathje, for pushing me well beyond what I thought were my limits, and for teaching me more than I could have hoped to learn in just one year; and my readers, Mary Hufford and Jeff Todd Titon, who have given so generously of their time to encourage and challenge me in countless ways.

To my MACS family: every single professor and student in the Cultural Sustainability program at Goucher College has made a lasting impression on me. Your work is so important, and I am honored to be counted among your ranks.

To the good people of the Rastafari community and the reggae scene in the Greater Philadelphia Area, especially my One Art family: your insights and creativity are foundational to this thesis. I pray that we may continue to bring positive change to our neighbors for many years to come.

To those who helped in my brief trip to Jamaica: from the advisors at Penn State Brandywine to the elders and faithful Rastafari of Scotts Pass, Bobo Hill, the School of Vision, and beyond, your word-sounds continue to empower me in my life and my work.

To everyone who has played music with me over the years: thank you for expanding my creative horizons, for sharing a part of your soul with me, and for leaving a lasting imprint on mine.

To my family: a person's parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, and uncles are the first people with whom he feels connection and belonging. Thank you for being such shining examples of love and unity, the substance of my work.

To my wife, mi reina, mi emperatriz, mi vida: your love, goodness, and patience have made this possible. Thank you for making me more joyful and hard-working, and for teaching me more about connection and belonging with every day we are together.

To Jah: continue to speak life and love into all things.

## Introduction

For Rastafarians, *reasoning* is a sacred form of dialogue, an exchange of ideas or “sounds” on matters of faith, identity, or collective goals. While an outside observer might think it looks like no more than a loosely structured conversation at an informal gathering, a reasoning (also known as a *grounding* or *grounation*, although these terms are also interchangeable with *binghi*, a more formal gathering with reasoning and chanting) offers participants an opportunity to learn about Rasta culture and history while expressing opinions, concerns, and hopes for the future of the movement. The general lack of order or formality in this ritual exemplifies the anti-hierarchical nature of Rastafari, and in theory, it allows each member to have an equally valid voice in the ongoing process of the collective’s cultural invention. Some *mansions* (sects) of Rastafari have a designated house or tabernacle for regular meetings, where reasoning and chanting take place; however, there need not be a plan or a sacred space for two or more people to gather and reason. While it may most likely occur on a Sabbath or a holy day on the Rasta calendar, any day or time is fit for reasoning.

I had contacted a few Rasta *bredren* and *sistren* (brothers and sisters) in September of 2014, hoping to interview them for their perspectives on the faith, especially the concepts of *InI* and vibrations. Not expecting more than one or two to arrive at the One Art Community Center, located in West Philadelphia, on the Sunday afternoon I had suggested, I brought my video camera and planned to take no more than an hour for each interview. I was surprised when eight people showed up at roughly the same time, and I did not want to make any of them wait around while I interviewed others. Not at all prepared to set up my camera to record the whole group at once, I suggested that we all sit in a circle with my audio recorder in the middle, and that it would be a more organic reasoning without anyone having to talk for the camera. Everyone

agreed, and as they all moved their chairs into place, local reggae musician Timi Tanzania took out an acoustic guitar and started playing a bass line and chords that were familiar to all of us: “Satta Massagana,” a song by The Abyssinians<sup>1</sup> that has become a sort of anthem for Rastafarians. “There is a land,” some of us started singing in unison, and then harmonizing, “far, far away....” After we finished singing, I explained that I wanted to learn more about *word-sound power*, the idea that the vibrations of our speech, as well as music, have a real, tangible influence on the material world, not only in the sense of affecting social relationships. It soon occurred to me that everyone present was a musician, in one capacity or another, and although they did not have much to say with regard to the philosophical or scientific aspects of my prompt, they had given a lot of thought to how their music, words, and actions influence others.

Several minutes into our reasoning, we began to consider the negativity that is communicated to children through popular music, television, advertising, and social media. Timi made a great point about how the youth are “overloaded with outside stimuli... so much materialism, so much emphasis on getting money,” and then he seemed to attribute this problem to the fact that their elders are failing to provide a positive example:

We as adults, we don't get a chance to do what we're doing now, which is crucial, which is critical, in terms of as they say [what we were talking about] initially: word, sound, and power. Because the word is – we're talkin' about “What is reality? How is reality, how do we function in this reality?” Many of us can't function. Many of us has given up. This is how we sustain – sustainability is being able to talk to one another, being able to get information from each other. And through the roots and culture of it all, we're able to talk about those things that have strengthened and powered our ancestors from way back when.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The Abyssinians, “Satta Massagana,” from *Satta Massagana*, © 1993, 1976 by Heartbeat Records, Heartbeat CDHB 120, Compact disc. “There is a land, far, far away/ Where there's no night, there's only day/ Look into the Book of Life, and you will see/ That there's a land, far, far away/ The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords/ Sit upon his throne, and he rules us all/ Look into the Book of Life and you will see/ That he rules us all.”

2. Timi Tanzania, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 21, 2014.



Timi's mention of sustainability caught my attention for a couple of reasons: 1) because my studies in cultural sustainability have sensitized me to the many uses and understandings of this word in a variety of contexts, especially concerning cultural identity; and 2) because at One Art, where I volunteer some of my free time, we have recently been discussing sustainable approaches to gardening and engaging members of the community in a deeper appreciation for the environment and their physical, mental, and spiritual health. Although I had been familiar with several scholars' analyses of reasoning as an important practice in Rastafari, especially Kebede and Knottnerus' observations that it is "one of the ways by which Rastafarians reinforce their commitment to the movement" and "that it allows every member of the movement to be an interpreter of the movement,"<sup>3</sup> I had not specifically considered reasoning as an example of cultural sustainability. However, it is the democratic and participatory nature of talking to one another, getting information from each other, and drawing from a large pool of ancestral resources that makes reasoning such a vital practice for the cohesion and ideological evolution of the Rastafari movement.

My previous research among this community in 2013 dealt with how music and other cultural expressions in the reggae scene contribute to a sense of identity or a reconciliation of conflicting identities and moralities. Prior to this, in 2010, during my brief study of the Rastafari community in Jamaica for my undergraduate thesis, I asked questions about the relationships between reggae music and Rasta perspectives on racial and religious identity. For my current research, I wanted to fill in some gaps and learn more about a few of the concepts that my

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3. Alemseghed Kebede and J. David Knottnerus, "Beyond the Pales of Babylon: The Ideational Components and Social Psychological Foundations of Rastafari," *Sociological Perspectives* 41 (1998): 506, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1389561>.

interviewees had mentioned but not explained in detail: InI, word-sound power, and vibration. While I still have much to learn about the diverse perspectives on these ideas, I did manage to document a few profound insights, which I analyze in this thesis. More importantly, I had several opportunities to participate in reasoning, allowing me to discover the performative, political, and spiritual potential that arises when people come together with a common purpose to connect with each other and their environments through verbal and musical sound. My observations and analyses of these events, as well as a reflection on my relationship to the Rastafari community, is presented here as a contribution to discourses in cultural sustainability and other interdisciplinary studies that examine creative expression as an ecological issue – not only in the metaphorical sense of “cultural ecology,”<sup>4</sup> but also in the literal connections between humans and the natural world through cultural life.

### **Faith, Hope, and Livity**

Most of the Rastafarians I have met in the Philadelphia area are insistent about one thing: Rastafari is not a religion. While many often use the words “movement,” “culture,” and “faith” to describe their Rasta identity, it seems that all would agree on one term that captures the collective vision and ethos of Rastafari: *livity*. Signifying something more than a lifestyle but different from a belief system, *livity* is a concept that motivates Rastafarians to adjust their behaviors and attitudes in pursuit of an ideal peace and harmony among humanity and all of creation. Although this ideal is generally expressed in terms of hope and expectation for African repatriation, or a revitalization of an ancient African way of life, it has much in common with the

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4. Ann Markusen, Anne Gadwa, Elisa Barbour, and William Beyers, *California's Arts and Cultural Ecology*, Markusen Research Group, 2011, [http://metrisarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/1-ca\\_arts\\_ecology.pdf](http://metrisarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/1-ca_arts_ecology.pdf). This work builds upon the work of John Kreidler and Moy Eng, discussing cultural ecology as a paradigm for the connections between arts organizations, artists, supporters, and other entities and places within the arts and its corresponding economies.

goals and visions of various other secular and religious movements, including the Christian, Hindu, pacifist, and environmentalist values that have influenced Rastafarian thought throughout its first century. In fact, I have encountered Rastas who simultaneously identified as Christians, with the disclaimer that these terms signify not religious belief, but embracing of certain natural principles that require no allegiance to a human-made institution. The history of Rastafari, beginning among Jamaica's oppressed black communities and spreading throughout the entire world, reveals a strong commitment to the centrality of Africa alongside a flexibility and desire to transcend boundaries of culture, race, and nation.

Rastafari may not be unique in its advocacy for universal justice and non-violent resistance against various forms of oppression; however, unlike many members of other contemporary movements, Rastas tend to refrain from participation in political activities such as voting or communicating with elected representatives, and their articulations of identity emphasize intention more than cultural or ethnic difference. "You don't haffi dread [have to wear dreadlocks] to be Rasta"<sup>5</sup> is a phrase often used among Rastas to remind each other that the livity is not about what a person wears, but what they do and say. While members of some mansions of Rastafari wear certain headdresses, follow a strict diet, or observe the Sabbath in various ways, there are few criteria that are considered obligatory. Nearly all Rastafarians profess the divinity of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, and most express a desire to repatriate, literally or spiritually, to "Mama Africa." These basic tenets of the Rastafari faith, while clearly expressed through the African symbolism in Rasta art and worship, are nonetheless relevant to individuals of many nationalities and ethnicities, many of whom

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5. Morgan Heritage, "Don't Haffi Dread," from *Don't Haffi Dread*, © 1999 by VP Records, VP 1545, Compact disc.

undoubtedly first heard the message of Rastafari in the lyrics of Bob Marley and other popular reggae musicians. In Philadelphia, we have a mix of Rastas from the West Indies, African-Americans born and raised in the area who have “sighted up” (converted to) Rastafari after exploring their African roots, and individuals of other ethnicities who identify with the movement for other reasons. Whether these individuals wear dreadlocks, follow an *ital* (mostly vegan and raw) diet, or observe any traditional Rasta holy days, they all participate in one way or another in two creative practices: the linguistic play of Dread Talk (also known as Iyaric or InI language) and music, especially the two musical forms that were shaped by Rastafari in Jamaica during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: Nyahbinghi and reggae.

Dread Talk emerged in the early years of the Rastafari movement in Jamaica, in part, as one of many examples of Jamaicans’ linguistic ingenuity; more importantly, however, this practice of altering words in order to make speech more meaningful for members of the Rastafari community reflects the movement’s legacy of resistance against British colonial oppression.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Nyahbinghi drumming contains elements of the Buru and Kumina musical traditions that survived centuries of slavery in Jamaica,<sup>7</sup> yet it has been endowed by its Rasta performers with layers of significance and potential for expressing and effecting ideals of repatriation and social change.<sup>8</sup> Reggae music was influenced by the Nyahbinghi rhythms, along with the

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4. 6. Velma Pollard, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Kingston: Canoe Press, 1994),

7. Verena Reckord, “From Burru Drums to Reggae Ridims: The Evolution of Rasta Music,” in *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 238-40.

8. Kenneth Bilby, “Distant Drums: The Unsung Contribution of African-Jamaican Percussion to Popular Music at Home and Abroad,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 56 (2010): 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23050467>

Rastafarian themes evident in the lyrics of most reggae musicians. As the music and speech acts of Rastafarians amply demonstrate, the movement values sound as a transformational force, and creative sound-making is arguably as essential to Rastafarian cultural identity and practice as any tenet of faith or visible marker of Pan-African solidarity. Rastas use the term *word-sound power* to convey the idea that verbal communication by and between human agents is a means of sending a certain kind of energy or “vibe” toward the listener or into the environment. Based on this view of speech (which also applies to the “language” of drum sounds), Rastafarians often make an effort to alter certain English words, replacing the colonial meaning with one that proclaims liberation and positivity: “understanding” becomes “overstanding,” for example, in a speech act that rejects the placement of a human mind “under” a concept.

My interest in word-sound power comes first and foremost from my experiences as a musician in the Philadelphia reggae scene. In a broad sense, I am curious about the relationships between performance of sound and experience of the world, especially of identity and the environment. Within the context of the Rastafari movement, I explore these connections with regard to the social and ecological crises that Rastas seek to change through creative practice: neo-colonialism, pollution, racism, poverty, malnutrition, and unsustainable agriculture. I approach this inquiry through one specific term in particular, InI (alternately spelled I-and-I or I-an-I), a word-sound used in place of “we” or “us” to signify the common divine essence or “I” shared by all of humanity.

Not known to have been common in Rasta vocabulary until the 1960s, InI has nonetheless become such a central term in the Rastafarian worldview that it warrants a deeper

exploration than it has been given in existing scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Adrian Anthony McFarlane keenly notes that, while some Rastas might resist a discussion of their concepts in Western philosophical terms, InI may easily be placed in dialogue with the work of Plato or Spinoza, and to deny Rastafari a place in these discourses is to designate the movement's intellectual practices as somehow inferior.<sup>10</sup> My own interactions with Rastas suggest that, although a distrust of academic institutions remains, members of the movement find a source of pride and validation in the interest in their culture shown by social scientists, philosophers, botanists, and musicologists. It is with this *overstanding* of mixed feelings about scholarship that I pursue an ethnographic study of how the InI concept is expressed and defined in Rasta speech and music. Through participation in Rastafarian reasoning, I ask how InI, being the cornerstone of Rastafarian language, might resituate the I, or the agency of self, in social relationships as well as interconnectedness with the environment.

## **I and Culture**

Before any further consideration of InI and word-sound power in Rastafarian thought and practice, I want to establish “the I” as a basis for my inquiries into performativity, perception,

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9. Adrian Anthony McFarlane, “The Epistemological Significance of ‘I-an-I’ as a Response to Quashie and Anancyism in Jamaican Culture,” in *Chanting* (see note 7), 107. See also Ennis B. Edmonds, “Dread ‘I’ In-a-Babylon,” same volume, 23-35. This volume, along with the notable volumes by Chevannes, Zips, and Niaah, provide insightful but brief explanations of the “InI” term, mostly with regard to its use in place of “we,” but without much discussion of its paradoxical individual and collectivism. Despite McFarlane’s suggestion that this concept is worthy of more serious intellectual discourses, scholarship to date has not engaged with Rastafari in a deeper look at this particular aspect of its philosophy. Homiak’s “Dub History” (1998) seems to have gone further in depth than most in examining the significance of “I” terms, from both ethnographic and historical approaches, and Afari’s *Overstanding Rastafari* (2007) offers fresh perspectives from within the movement on a wide variety of Rasta philosophies; however, further ethnographic work, along with continued dialogue with Rastafarian academics, is needed for a long overdue treatment of *InI* as a philosophical, theological, and ecological concept that is central to the Rastafarian worldview and lifestyle.

10. *Ibid.*, 119.

and meaning-making. In doing so, I do not intend to provide a singular Rasta definition of this concept, nor do I wish to make an argument for or against this intellectual tradition; my goal is to bring Rastafari into dialogue with some relevant philosophical traditions, and I will argue that Rastafarian epistemologies decenter the mind, body, and senses, suggesting new possibilities for phenomenological ethnography and theory. The word “I” calls to mind several cultural, spiritual, and philosophical notions that merit more attention than I can give them in this thesis: self, soul, spirit, *atman*, cognition, identity, and person. Even to discuss ideas of an I/Other dualism evokes too many political discourses to address here, except inasmuch as they will arise in the statements of my research participants and Rastafarian authors. What I wish to explore is more foundational and universal: how are notions of the I informed by experience and perception? By invoking this latter term, I do not mean to venture into neuroscience or cognitive studies, although this territory clearly lends itself to interdisciplinary research. Rather, I will focus on what might be called personal or cultural perception: life as an aggregate of social experiences in which a consciousness or agency operates in relation to beings and bodies that are, to varying degrees, perceived to be similar to the essence or embodiment of the I.

As a major influence behind my imaginings of the I in social and aesthetic terms, the philosophy of Bakhtin will be instructive in this introduction. The challenge of solipsism, the uncertainty of anything existing outside of one’s own mind, assumes the thinking, perceiving I as a circumscribed unit or body – at least a body of cognition, if not a physical body. If the very nature of discourse does not negate the solipsistic dead end, it does reveal possibilities for understanding the I within an awareness of other bodies and voices. As Bakhtin writes, “Solipsism, which places the entire world within my consciousness, may be intuitively convincing, or at any rate understandable. But it would be intuitively quite incomprehensible to

place the entire world (including myself) in the consciousness of another human being who is so manifestly himself a mere particle of the macrocosm.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, if I am willing to begin with an admission that a body I perceive apart from my own is that of a real person, and not a deception of my imagination, I can proceed from there to delineate my own I in a manner similar to the way I perceive the physical and personal boundaries of the other. However, I can only get so far in constructing this image of myself, as it is impossible to gaze upon my actual, entire being while occupying the same space and time. By contrast, when I perceive a person as having an agency similar to my own, “the other person’s I is also subsumed under the category of the other as a constituent feature of him.”<sup>12</sup> Thus I may never experience my own I, embodied or otherwise, in the same manner in which I perceive the I in external beings, as objectified actors.

The relevance of such speculation for an anthropological study becomes clear when we set out to explore ideas such as identity, difference, and groupness, as I do in my interpretive phenomenological ethnography of Rastafari. In considering the existence of an I in others, the identification of oneself with humanity is articulated, albeit still problematic. Bakhtin’s formula seems to present a basis for this collectivity:

In one case, the process of constructing the ‘idea of man’ (man as value) may be expressed in the following way: man is I myself, as I myself experience myself, and others are the same as I myself. In the second case, it may be expressed as follows: man is all other human beings surrounding me, as I experience them, and I am the same as the others.<sup>13</sup>

Yet we still need to establish sameness in order to arrive at “the idea of man” or any category within the species. If it is enough to base this on a few common characteristics of bodies and

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11. M.M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), Kindle Locations 1618-1621.

12. *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 1592-1594.

13. *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 1878-1882.



their expressions, then we might ascribe a certain universal agency to human beings. We might also extend this logic to more specific identities: if I make the statement, “I am a musician,” I project my internal experience of “self as musician” onto others who perform music, especially those who embrace this skill-based identity. Still, each individual must deal with the dilemma of his or her own I perceiving its existence subjectively, while the I of any other body remains an external object. I cannot easily equate my own experiences in music or life, perceived as actions or observations of my own I, with the experiences of another, perceived as the experiences of an abstract I within someone else.

For Bakhtin, art and aesthetic activity provide a means of bridging this divide between perceptions of “my own I” and “the other’s I,” through phenomena of co-experience and empathy. If a particular human expression, whether an emotional statement or a work of art, communicates the I’s internal condition, then another’s “aesthetic cognition of such an object is the act of co-experiencing that inner state.” Challenging solipsism while maintaining a clear distinction between the subjective self and the objectified Other, he continues, “[W]hen we empathize or ‘in-feel’ our own inner state into an object, we still experience this state not as immediately our own, but as a state of contemplating the object, i.e., we co-experience with the object.”<sup>14</sup> In similar fashion, Merleau-Ponty cites language as a “cultural object” that constitutes common ground, “a being shared by two, and the other person is no longer for me a simple behavior in my transcendental field.”<sup>15</sup>

Although continental philosophy is well outside the scope of my research, I chose to include a brief consideration of these statements to help me articulate my own understanding of

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14. Ibid., Kindle Locations 2063-2074.

15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 370.

InI and its significance for conceptualizing community, self, and expressivity in Rastafari. Western notions of self and mind, like Eastern notions of atman and the Buddha seed, may be somewhat useful in explaining InI by comparison; however, in an attempt to avoid any oversimplification or syncretism, I approach this sort of analysis with caution. Focusing on themes of performance, relationship, and identity, I will discuss more about musical and linguistic utterance as constitutive communication, learning primarily from Rastafarians' perspectives on word-sound power. This requires a consideration of the spoken word as aesthetic activity rather than a strictly codified mode of communication. Much in the same way as music and visual art are performed and created as expressions of inner processes, so does language manifest as a realm of possibilities for co-experience: not just in the words as representations of ideas, but as a medium of tone, volume, percussive, and rhythm. The key here is to consider all forms of aesthetic behaviors as creative processes, cultural opportunities (I prefer this to Merleau-Ponty's "cultural object") for meaning-making in which the universality of the I becomes apparent.

### **Cultural Sustainability and the Rastafari Struggle**

Since I began my studies in the Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability (MACS) program at Goucher College, I have had the privilege of meeting scholars and professionals with a diverse set of backgrounds and interests. My cohort, for example, consists of anthropologists, artists, a chef, and cultural workers who organize and serve in various community folklife programming. In our courses, which cover topics including cultural partnership, ethnographic methods, management skills, and cultural theory, we have discussed several strategic and ethical issues that are common within community research or planning. One of the main problems I have given much thought is the question of how we determine which cultures and traditions to

preserve. If this were the entire essence of our field, I imagine our work would be just another form of cultural or historical preservation, revolving entirely around issues of authenticity, authority, and conserving tangible and intangible heritage. These factors are important, of course, both to the scholars who paved the way for this field as well as the communities with whom we work; however, one of the theoretical innovations of cultural sustainability is a consideration of expressive life in ecological terms. Inspired by sustainability discourses in environmental studies, our field acknowledges that culture is a process of changes and connections, rather than a fixed entity that has an ideal form that changes due to external and internal influences over time.

More than parallel disciplines with similar ecologies, environmental and cultural sustainability have many intersections, some more obvious than others. As indigenous knowledge dies, strategies for natural resource stewardship and dealing with climate changes are also endangered. Such delicate connections between human communities and their habitats remind us of the impermanence of cultural identity; we are vulnerable not only to external social influences, but also to the evolution of the landscape and all its life. Rory Turner, one of the scholars who established the MACS program at Goucher, speaks of the interconnectedness that underlies the eternal processes of invention that take place in cultural communities and ecosystems.

But the truth is that we do not get to enter the work of culture after all is said and done. We encounter a world where culture has been invented and reinvented countless times, and much of that invention/performance has not been without consequence. What folly it would be to set people loose on a world to intervene in culture without the tools to be aware of the complexities of its reifications and reframing! Still, one thing that has been foremost in my efforts to invite people into a field where culture is a big part of the topic, is to affirm the power of culture not to define but to renew, not as a transposition, but as a gift. For it is here that the heart of culture really lies, to connect people in community or

rather to reveal the essential community that is at the basis of all humanity and, dare I say it, of all life.<sup>16</sup>

This “gift” is a mystery that sustains life by taking on a life of its own. In doing so, it is often mistaken for an absolute reality: culture as the way things are, the way things have become, a climax or plateau in humanity’s creative evolution. However, I see the term “cultural sustainability” not as a vocation *to sustain culture*, but as a mission *to sustain people through cultural practice*.

Rastafari history and culture provide ample lessons in cultural and environmental sustainability. From the struggles to preserve (or revitalize) African traditions in the diaspora, to debates about authentic faith and worship in Rasta communities around the world, to the ital diet and lifestyle aimed at bringing Rastafarians into communion with nature, culture is regarded as a set of tools for education and empowerment. The movement’s legacy of resistance against colonial authority also reminds us that sustaining is a process of action; Rastas in Jamaica performed their cultural identity in order to survive. Paradoxically, many have put their lives on the line in order to preserve their culture. An ethnographer, such as myself, or anyone working in collaboration with the Rastafari movement, need not evaluate every one of its traditions as worthy of sustaining; a strong set of shared values is helpful, of course, but a few differences need not hinder partnership. We must, however, view the community itself as worthy of sustaining, realizing that such a project requires ancient knowledge alongside new and difficult ideas. This is the essence of reasoning: ritually entering a liminal moment in which the wisdom of the past meets visions of the future, and our visions become part of the community’s

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16. Rory Turner, “Digging in the Dirt of the Landscape of Cultural Sustainability,” Opening Plenary Address at the annual meeting for the American Folklore Society, Providence, Rhode Island, October 16, 2013.

collective invention, whether we intend it or not. Will our voices be heard as advocates for the people and their joy, or will we focus too narrowly on documenting a cultural moment in time, colonizing our “subjects” with images and description?

## **A Review of the Literature**

I submit this work as a contribution to both Rastafari scholarship and discourses within the new field of cultural sustainability. As such, it pays only brief attention to the literature on the movement's early history, focusing rather on the ongoing traditions and discourses that may easily enter into fruitful dialogue with various topics in the social sciences. I consider the moral and spiritual dimensions of Rastafari, its modes of creative expression, its frameworks for identity and epistemology, and its understanding of nature, and I consider how these topics might inform scholarly approaches to cultural issues: boundaries, belonging, authenticity, authority, preservation, pluralism, the challenges of environmental change, and the sustainability of community.

Before I review some of the formal scholarship that provides an academic context for my work, I must acknowledge my Rastafarian interlocutors, whose narratives and creativity are equally instructive for historical, anthropological, musicological, linguistic, and theological analysis. Abijah Lioness, Boul Fortune, Brawta, Brian Davis, Dubsmith, Jah1, Larry White, Malaika Hart, Natty Rebel, Ras Ben, and Ryoko – their perspectives reveal a diversity of experience within the reggae scene and Rasta community in the Greater Philadelphia Area. The priests and empresses of the Boboshanti congregation in Philadelphia are also noteworthy contributors; although I have not yet had the opportunity to interview them or document their cultural life, our reasonings, along with my brief experiences in their sabbatical worship, taught me a great deal about the varieties of Rastafarian experience and expression. Finally, the voices of the Rastafari in Jamaica, who graciously reasoned with me in 2010, resound here as culturally and academically relevant: Bongo Shephan Fraser, Bongo Trevor Campbell, Priest Dermot

Fagan, Priest Kassa, Priest Navandy Thompson, Priest Oucal Dennyson, Ras Iyenton, Ras Sasse, and the late High Priest George Ions.

### **Rastafari History and Ideology**

John Homiak<sup>17</sup> coined the term “dub history” to describe the various versions and evolving themes in the oral histories shared by his Rastafarian interlocutors during the 1980s, invoking the dub reggae tradition of remixing and adding various sound effects to previously released records. Among the various Rastafari scholarship published from perspectives of anthropology and religious studies – Murriel,<sup>18</sup> Spencer,<sup>19</sup> Zips,<sup>20</sup> and Edmonds<sup>21</sup> are among the insightful contributions over the last thirty years – Barry Chevannes<sup>22</sup> contributions remain some of the most comprehensive with regard to the scope of the movement, providing a glimpse into the cultural life and background of the several mansions of Rastafari. More recently, Charles

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17. John P. Homiak, “Dub History: Notes on Oral Tradition and Rasta Ethnography,” *Rastafari & Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, ed. Barry Chevannes (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), Kindle Location 1897.

18. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009). Kindle Edition.

19. William David Spencer, “The First Chant: Leonard Howell’s The Promised Key,” in *Chanting* (see note 7), 361-89.

20. Werner Zips, ed., *Rastafari: A Universal Philosophy in the Third Millennium* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005).

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

22. Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

Price<sup>23</sup> has offered a rich, ethnographic account of Rasta identity transformation. It is Homiak's work, however, that has challenged me to assess Rastafari as a "speech community"<sup>24</sup> that collectively participates in the construction of identity through circulation of word-sounds. His account of the evolution of Rastafarian language is foundational to my present analysis of the relationship between word-sound power and identity.

The legacy of anti-colonial resistance within the movement is noted in nearly all scholarship on Rastafari, but especially in the work of Horace Campbell,<sup>25</sup> who locates this trend within an extensive history of violent and creative protest in Jamaica. As examples of how music has been useful toward Rastafari's non-violent revolutionary program, Verena Reckord<sup>26</sup> traces the development of Nyahbinghi music as an attempt to develop an African style of worship. Likewise, Hebdige<sup>27</sup> and King<sup>28</sup> have noted the role that reggae has played in challenging hegemony. In a similar vein, wordplay and other rhetorical devices are employed as creative challenges to colonial language, as Pollard<sup>29</sup> and McFarlane<sup>30</sup> have explained. Noting the

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23. Charles Price, *Becoming Rasta: Origins of Rastafari Identity in Jamaica* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Kindle Edition.

24. Homiak, "Dub History," Kindle Location 1902.

25. Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1987).

26. Reckord, "From Burru Drums to Reggae Ridims."

27. Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'N' Mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

28. Stephen A. King, *Rastafari, Reggae, and the Rhetoric of Social Control* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002).

29. Pollard, *Dread Talk*.

30. Adrian Anthony McFarlane, "The Epistemological Significance of 'I-an-I.'"



connection between word-sound power and the West African philosophy of *Nommo*, Prahlad<sup>31</sup> details how the rich tradition of Jamaican proverbs have been disseminated through reggae music and Rastafarian reasoning. Of the latter, Barnett,<sup>32</sup> Homiak,<sup>33</sup> and Kebede and Knottnerus<sup>34</sup> explain the significance of this sacred practice.

### **Ritual, Performance, and Being**

In his foundational work on the ritual process<sup>35</sup> and liminality,<sup>36</sup> Victor Turner provides some of the theoretical basis for my considerations of reasoning and musical performance as occasions in which dominant social structures are challenged by Rasta culture. Homiak's review of *Churchical Chants of the Nyabingi*,<sup>37</sup> as well as the album itself,<sup>38</sup> offers a view of the liturgical character of Rastafarian worship, connecting its content to that of popular reggae music. Thirty years later, my contributions might be regarded as a glimpse into how these

31. Sw. Anand Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom: Proverbs in Jamaican Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

32. Michael Barnett, "Rastafari Dialectism: The Epistemological Individualism and Conectivism of Rastafari," *Caribbean Quarterly* 48 (2002): 54-61.

33. Homiak, "Dub History."

34. Kebede and Knottnerus, "Beyond the Pales of Babylon."

35. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Transaction, 1995).

36. Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," *The Rice University Studies* 60 (2002): 53-92, <http://hdl.handle.net/1911/63159>.

37. John Homiak, Review of *Churchical Chants of the Nyabingi*, production arranged by Elliot Leib, *American Anthropologist* 86 (1984): 1067-69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/679264>.

38. Elliot Leib, prod., *Churchical Chants of the Nyabingi*, © 1997 by Heartbeat Records, Heartbeat 847261, compact disc.

cultural activities have evolved within and beyond Jamaica. The work of Alice O’Grady<sup>39</sup> on liminal experiences in the United Kingdom’s underground club scene are especially useful in considering the counter-cultural dimensions of reggae and Rastafari; although her work does not apply to reggae music specifically, it is an important consideration of a subcultural genre that, like reggae, is performed in spaces that are not sanctioned for the formal use of a religious group, regardless of whatever spirituality might be present in the events. Some of the notable differences between the club scene, the reggae scene, and sacred worship highlight the reciprocity of identity and ritual. While I add nothing significant to any theory of the ritual process itself, I bring these discussions of liminality into dialogue with Jane Bennett<sup>40</sup> and J.K. Gibson-Graham,<sup>41</sup> whose notions of “distributive agency” and “vibrant matter” might be useful in decentering the human – in this case, through creative performance, locating InI within a presence that is not circumscribed by bodies.

In thinking about speech as performance, I have focused on the social dimensions of register as well as the functional dimensions of content and style. Foley<sup>42</sup> and Bauman<sup>43</sup> inform my view that speech genres, while useful and meaningful categories, are flexible and contingent

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39. Alice O’Grady, “Spaces of Play: The Spatial Dimensions of Underground Club Culture and Locating the Subjunctive,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music* 4 (2012): 86-106, doi10.12801/1947-5403.2012.04.01.04.

40. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

41. J.K. Gibson-Graham, “A feminist project of belonging for the Anthropocene,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 18 (2011): 1–21, doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2011.535295.

42. John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

43. Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist* 77 (1975): 290-311, <http://www.jstor.org/goucher.idm.oclc.org/stable/674535>.

upon situations and listeners; therefore, while speech takes form from accepted meanings and existing social structures, it is also constitutive of novel meanings and emergent social structures. Prahlad's differentiation between levels of meaning in proverbs<sup>44</sup> is also helpful in thinking about the social experience of language, pointing towards an understanding of word-sound power as a process of intersubjectivity. Considering the functional aspects of speech acts, I examine the Rastafarian practices of verbally "burning" wickedness or communicating positive "vibes" to counter negativity, and I refer to J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterance<sup>45</sup> to propose a deeper thinking about the entire spectrum of sound that gives additional power to words.

The relationship between sound and power is further explored within discussions of "being-in-the-world"<sup>46</sup> – the body or the I within environmental and experiential contexts. I think of my own research – observing, performing, and reasoning within the Rastafari community – as the sort of performative ethnography outlined by Deborah Wong<sup>47</sup> (I write more about my ethnographic influences in my Methodology). Titon's<sup>48</sup> thinking about co-presence, a concept he has recently explored within the emerging field of ecomusicology, leads me into an analysis of music and speech as ways of connecting with the environment. Rastafarian ecological concerns

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44. Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom*.

45. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

46. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

47. Deborah Wong, "Moving: From Performance to Performative Ethnography and Back Again," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 76-89.

48. Jeff Todd Titon, "The Nature of Ecomusicology," *Música e Cultura* 8 (2013): 8-18, <http://musicaecultura.abetmusica.org.br>.

are often expressed in terms of vibration, as Van de Berg<sup>49</sup> discusses with regard to the Rasta community in North Carolina; the relevance of vibrations to my analysis becomes clear when considering the epistemological links to West African philosophy, as outlined by Denise Martin.<sup>50</sup> The importance of these concepts from Dogon cosmology, as explained by Janheinz Jahn,<sup>51</sup> is apparent in the statements I have recorded, both in Jamaica and Philadelphia, regarding the effects of musical and verbal vibrations on the natural order of creation. This last point, the creative and destructive potentials of sound, is my basis for synthesizing perspectives on ritual, performance, language, music, and the environment, into a deeper consideration of what InI means for Rastafari and the world.

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49. William R. Van de Berg, "Rastafari Perceptions of Self and Symbolism," in *New Trends and Developments in African Religions*, ed. Peter Bernard Clarke (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 159-75.

50. Denise Martin, "Pan African Metaphysical Epistemology: A Pentagonal Introduction," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2 (2008): 209-27.

51. Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1969).

## Methodology

Any attempt to define or delineate a Rastafari community in the Greater Philadelphia Area must be met with some amount of scrutiny. Despite the common rejection of the “religion” label, Rastafarian expressions of identity have much in common with those of religious groups: they are not strictly bounded by geographic or ethnic categories; they vary in degrees of devotion to cultural participation and congregational attendance; and they embrace certain tenets of faith and morality, although the flexibility allowed in interpretation and adherence to these ideals is perhaps greater than what one might find among traditional religious communities. Most significantly, religious identities are chosen – more so than other types of identity – by many individuals through processes of conversion or initiation. Phenotypes, inherited socioeconomic status, and location often influence or overlap with one’s identification within a religious or spiritual community; however, the decision to identify oneself as Rastafari is not as clearly influenced by any of these factors in the same way that national, racial, ethnic, and class distinctions are often articulated.

For this reason, I have found it helpful to think of the Rasta community in Philadelphia as a loose network of individuals and families who associate with each other through attendance at reggae concerts and other cultural events. Much of this fellowship occurs at the One Art Community Center (formerly known as Wall Street International), where concerts, workshops, and other activities bring together artists, healers, gardeners, and people of all ages and interests, not only Rastafarians. In my research, I consider Rastafari tradition, not only as something sustained by specific groups of self-identified Rastafarians, but as a set of ideas and performative practices functioning to sustain and identify a *sense* of community, which is typically expressed in terms of culture, faith, movement, or livivity. Within this context, I have employed an

ethnographic method that favors emic expressions of perception and experience, rather than what I have observed of the structures and boundaries of Rasta identity. While the latter is useful for contextualizing the movement, especially insofar as the history and motivations of Rastafari inform the cultural experience of many adherents, such a scientific approach would add little to what already has been published by Homiak,<sup>52</sup> Chevannes,<sup>53</sup> Barnett,<sup>54</sup> and other anthropologists whose work is complemented by the devotional and scholarly literature of Rastafarian authors and artists. Much has been written, spoken, and sung about the legendary struggles and advancements of the Jamaican Rastafari movement, the evolution of its ideology, and its place within the narratives of the African Diaspora. What interests me here is how some of the performance traditions that have emerged from Rasta cultural life inform notions of being, agency, and Otherness. In order to explore these phenomena, I have intended my participant-observation and interview questions as inquiries into experience and expression.

Following the ethnographic approaches championed by ethnomusicologists such as Berger<sup>55</sup> and Titon,<sup>56</sup> I frame this project as a phenomenological exploration of Rastafarian expressivity, a study of “being-in-the-world” through experience of sound. My focus includes music as well as speech genres that are not considered musical in form; however, I am at least as interested in the sound of words as I am with their literal and social meanings, and even these

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52. Homiak, “Dub History.”

53. Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots & Ideology*.

54. Barnett, “Rastafari Dialectism.”

55. Harris M. Berger, “Phenomenology and the Ethnography of Popular Music: Ethnomusicology at the Juncture of Cultural Studies and Folklore,” in *Shadows* (see note 46), 62-75.

56. Jeff Todd Titon, “Knowing Fieldwork,” in *Shadows* (see note 46), 25-41.

semiotic directions ultimately lead back to questions of experience. The interview process is useful for gathering this range of data, including personal accounts of experience as well as descriptions of social life and cultural practice; moreover, some of my participants and I have conceived of our conversations as sacred reasonings, which affords me direct experience in what Rastas regard as a cultural and spiritual activity. Likewise, much of my observation of Rastafarian cultural life has resulted in or from some degree of direct or indirect participation on my part. As a reggae musician, I have been in dialogue, both musical and lyrical, with Rastafarian musicians and audience members. When attending sabbatical services, I was asked to leave my recording instruments outside of the tabernacles, and this absence of ethnographic tools facilitated my engagement in a certain level of participation during worship and reasoning, rather than documentation. These experiences comprise much of the catalog of words, ideas, gestures, and behaviors from which I draw when communicating with Rastas, contributing to a sense of collaboration I share with the people I interview. While this does not negate the problems of representation that arise from the fact, among others, that I do not profess a commitment to the Rastafari faith, it does inform my approach to ethnographic analysis. As an account and analysis of my experiences and observations of Rastafarian creative expression, this paper is an extension of my cultural participation – a form of reasoning or performance of word-sound power outside of acoustic context.

As an example of how my participation in Rasta discourse and cultural life has influenced my approach to the concepts I discuss, I consider some common distinctions between various levels of experience – bodily, spiritual, social, intellectual – as problematic, if even useful for categorization. Rastafarian thought has emerged out of a resistance to what are viewed as oppressive ideas within Babylonian (a term generally used for institutionalized oppression,

especially colonial rule, but which may also refer to any sort of evil in societies and individuals) forms of Christianity and secularism. One of these concepts is the separation between mind, body, and spirit, an idea connected to the promise of an otherworldly life after the death of the body, and the Rastafarian challenges to this concept include holistic approaches to healing, an impetus for repatriation and revitalization of an ancient African way of life, and general concern for social justice, rather than waiting for a better world to come after the present one. Because the physical and spiritual aspects of the self, or the I, are virtually inseparable within a Rastafarian framework, I interpret various statements and behaviors as expressions of a unified, multidimensional I, perhaps favoring one facet of the self, though not to the exclusion of other dimensions. For example, when Bongo Shephan spoke of a reggae music that “touch your heart,”<sup>57</sup> he used a phrase that many people use figuratively, meaning the evoking of an emotional or spiritual response. However, in the context of Rastafarian discourse, where the Nyahbinghi rhythm is viewed more than figuratively as a “heartbeat” and a “riddim of life that coincides with creation,”<sup>58</sup> I understand Shephan’s remarks as describing a musical experience that is simultaneously physical and spiritual, without any clear distinction between the two. I also analyze comments regarding social and historical concepts in this way, knowing that “InI” reflects a transcendence of boundaries on a level that is both physical (through music, word-sound, and sharing of resources) and metaphysical (through identifications of blackness, victimization, and eschatology). Building upon Merleau-Ponty’s challenge of the traditional mind-body dualism of Western philosophy, which theorized the body as the locus of knowledge

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57. Bongo Shephan Fraser, interview by Benjamin Bean, Red Hills, JA, November 23, 2010.

58. Ras Iyenton, interview by Benjamin Bean, Tredways, JA, November 23, 2010.



and perception,<sup>59</sup> I consider experience to be something that takes place both within and without the parameters of individual bodies or specific moments in time. It is with this lens, informed in part by my participation in Rastafarian cultural life, that I set out to interpret Rastafari cultural experience.

Acknowledging the problems and limitations with such an approach, I nevertheless suggest that appropriating Rastafarian concepts to analyze Rasta discourse is a method that fits well within the movement's tradition of reasoning and grappling with the tension between objective truth and subjective realities. Calling for an anthropological embracing of contradictions, Roy Wagner writes, "We should subordinate [the assumptions and preconceptions of the ethics and methodologies of fieldwork] to the inventiveness of the 'subject peoples,' *so as not to preempt their creativity within our own invention.*"<sup>60</sup> More than engaging my Rastafarian interlocutors in a process of mutual invention, however, I follow Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's method of "controlled equivocation,"<sup>61</sup> noting that various key concepts and tropes – nature, race, body, spirit – signify different understandings of phenomena, even within a particular cultural context. Controlling or negotiating these differences requires, as Marisol de la Cadena writes, "paying attention to the process of translation itself."<sup>62</sup> Since the inception of the movement in the 1930s, Rastafari has emerged within a tradition of controlling the equivocations

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59. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 431.

60. Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 159, emphasis in original.

61. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Persectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2 (2004): 3-20, <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol2/iss1/1>.

62. Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond 'Politics,'" *Cultural Anthropology* 25 (2010): 351, doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01061.x.

inherent in colonial and creole experiences, negotiating the contradictions of language, racial identities, and industrial society. Despite the diverse understandings I bring into dialogue with those of several Rastas, transparency will give way to discovery within the processes of translation at work in my interviews and accounts of my observations.

### **Interviews and Reasoning**

Beginning in the spring of 2013, I have conducted several open-ended interviews with Rastafarians in the Philadelphia area, discussing music, identity, and the Rastafari faith in general. Most of my collaborators are musicians, a fact which I attribute to two circumstances in particular: first, my work in the music scene has allowed me to establish relationships with other musicians, primarily, with whom I already have much in common; secondly, musicians seem to be more comfortable talking about their ideas, especially when it comes to the faith that motivates their creative activities. The second point also applies to Natty Rebel, a mural artist who, having traveled and painted around and outside of the country, has plenty of experience articulating the ideas behind his work. While the prevalence of artists in my ethnography does limit this representation of perspectives within the Rasta community, which are certainly much broader in scope, I have attempted to bring some balance to this by including discussions of topics that are not specific to the experience of musical performance. The topic of this study pertaining to the nature of musical and spoken sound, I am not entirely unjustified in giving preference to individuals who are professionally involved in the reggae music scene, although this was not my intention. However, I acknowledge that this study lacks the invaluable perspectives of Rastas who are not as fluent in the discourses surrounding music, language, and other forms of creative expression.

In each of my interviews, I asked one or more very specific questions: “What does *InI* mean to you?” “Explain *word-sound power*.” “What do we mean when we talk about good or bad vibrations?” Most of the time, if we were not in a hurry, I would begin with a more general inquiry about Rastafari: “Tell me about your faith,” or “How and when did you become a Rastafarian?” Our conversations invariably have shifted to topics that attract the interest of many Rastas: guns, education, marijuana, industrial pollution, and corruption in government and big business. In most cases, I have refrained from interrupting or attempting to redirect the conversation toward the original topic, and the free flow of our reasoning has brought to light some valuable perspectives. During my research in 2013, I was too concerned with documenting thoughts on one particular theme: how cultural expressions in the reggae scene help to reconcile conflicting identities and moralities; for example, the march-like style of dancing to reggae music contrasts with the sort of immodest dancing and behavior that occurs at many music venues in the Philadelphia area, allowing Rastafarians to maintain a connection with a cherished musical form without compromising their values. Whereas in the course of that research I would constantly try to steer the conversation by asking relevant questions – “How do you feel about people coming to reggae shows and getting drunk?” or “Do you think that many reggae fans even know who Haile Selassie is?” – in my interviews throughout 2014, I learned to listen to what others felt was most important to share, and then I would ask follow-up questions, if necessary. Of course, I added my own opinions and ideas whenever they seemed relevant and appropriate, and if I felt like interest in a particular tangent was waning, I would raise a new question to learn more about word-sound power or InI; however, I made a conscious effort to avoid controlling the discussions.

Although I typically asked people for interviews to help me understand certain Rastafarian concepts for my thesis, I often suggested that we “get together and reason.” This not only seemed like a more organic and familiar way for people to discuss their faith, but it also framed the goals of my research in such a way that allowed me to become a participant in a significant Rasta tradition. Reasoning, as I explained earlier, is one of the ways in which Rastas interpret the movement and continue its ideological narrative by discussing theological and political topics. Rather than framing my research as an investigation – I ask questions and the “subject” informs – I thought of reasoning as an opportunity for all involved, including myself, to be participants with equal potential for meaningful contribution to the discourse. The obvious difference is in the level of experience within the movement: having learned about Rastafari primarily through reading and observation, rather than practice, my perspective is naturally different. To whatever extent I may have been an “outsider” in these situations, however, the limited influence of structure or focus on my specific research questions allowed a more genuine, natural vibe to emerge throughout our reasoning, in contrast to the inhibitions that microphones and cameras often impose upon dialogue.

Despite my conscious effort to foster a collaborative spirit through this approach, I have a distinct privilege as ethnographer: to listen to my recordings, transcribe various selections, and analyze the content of our reasonings over an extended period of time. Whereas my research participants had an hour or two to contribute to one conversation, I have had several months to recontextualize their statements as I have continued reading about Rastafari and exploring related concepts. As I selected portions of my interviews to address my main questions with diverse perspectives, I tried to balance this focused gleaning with time spent listening to off-topic comments, taking note of points that were discussed at length or emphasized by volume or tone.

I will not examine these themes in this paper, except where they relate to my analysis of Rastafarian experience and expression of sound; however, I have listened to many segments of my recordings for speech elements that I can analyze independently of the topical content – cadence, inflection, pitch variation, and use of culturally specific interjections, as a few examples – and in my analysis, I consider these sounds as examples of word-sound power performed and experienced in the context of the Rasta community. Not taking my ethnographic position lightly, I intend to make these recordings, as well as this text, available to members of the community and anyone who wants to learn more about Rastafari. For the purposes of this paper, I approach the present analysis as an extension of the reasonings in which I was fortunate to participate.

### **From Jamaica to Philadelphia**

For my undergraduate thesis at Penn State University, I spent two weeks in Jamaica during November of 2010, conducting interviews with Rastafarians on the topic of white reggae musicians, asking questions about authenticity, ownership, authorship, and identity. This was too short a period of time for me to develop a deeper familiarity or meaningful connection with the movement, despite the several lengthy interviews and continued correspondence with a few of the individuals I met. However, the hard work of my guide, Nyahbinghi elder Bongo Shephan Fraser, afforded me the opportunity to speak with well-respected members of the movement, some of whom had been active Rastafarians since the 1950s. During this study, I used a very specific set of questions I had prepared in advance, but these questions were, more often than not, prompts for conversations that turned in many directions. Some of the concepts that were repeatedly discussed by my Jamaican interlocutors are relevant to my more recent studies, and I have referred to these interviews in my search for Rastafarian perspectives on word-sound power, InI, vibrations, and the relationship between sound and the environment.

In addition to their contributions toward the discussion of my thesis topic, these voices provide an opportunity for comparison and contrast with the interviews I have conducted in my hometown. Jamaica is the birthplace of the Rastafari movement, yet many Rastas have moved to Philadelphia and other cities in the US, where a significant number of converts complements the population of migrants from the West Indies. According to the Pan-African ideology of Rastafari, a legacy of Marcus Garvey's philosophies, neither the US or Jamaica are considered "home"; Africa is the "motherland" to which Rastas seek to be repatriated, either in a literal sense or by symbolic identification. Several diasporic layers are at work here: in one sense, Rastas in Jamaica and Philadelphia share an African identity in common, expressed in their worship of Haile Selassie, as the most common example; on the other hand, elements of the cultures surrounding Rastas in their respective locations, such as food and music, influence how these individuals speak and behave. Wordplay is a common practice, but the difference in pronunciation between Jamaican English and American English yields different ways of expressing and understanding speech acts such as puns, proverbs, and rhyme. Because some of the Rastas I have interviewed in Philadelphia are from the West Indies or have spent significant amounts of time there with families or friends, I occasionally observe a blend of influences that are secondary to the Rastafarian identity, yet they are pertinent to this discussion of expression and experience. My research in Jamaica is therefore useful for comparing and contrasting characteristics of speech acts as well as identification in response to surrounding cultural phenomena.

### **Entering into the Struggle**

In my roles as musician and ethnographer, I have observed aspects of performance and participation that are common to music and verbal dialogue, including the conversation-style

interviews in my research. I will discuss these observations in my analysis: the ritual elements of concerts and conversation; the rhythm of reasoning and the lyricality of drumming; and the functions of each in transmitting cultural and ideological information. My consideration of these roles extends to a self-reflection on my identities as artist and scholar: do my regular music-making and cultural documentation activities facilitate my access into the Rastafari community in some way? One example from my visit to the Scotts Pass Nyahbinghi Centre in Jamaica will be instructive here.

I had the opportunity to interview High Priest George Ions of the Nyahbinghi Order in November of 2010. I will revisit this brief conversation in my final chapter, but for the purposes of my methodology, I mention this here because it was one of two instances in which my identities as musician and ethnographer were blurred. As we discussed the significance of racial, national, and religious heritage in the context of reggae music, I wondered if my comprehension of the lyrical content, and even my experience of the music, might be compromised or somehow less authentic, because of my personal background.

Bean: I mean, because we can hear about it through the lyrics, and we can relate to the rhythm, the pulse, the bass line... for me, personally, that moves me. But do you think that I'm, in any way, limited in understanding what the music really represents, being that I never went through that struggle myself?

George: Never went through it. Never went through the struggle. So what is this now? You have to search, go a research now. Have to do a research now, that you can enter within the struggle.

Naturally, I want to “do a research” that brings me into a meaningful partnership with the Rastafari community. One of the small but not insignificant steps I have taken is sharing my video footage with the people I interview or observe in performance, so that they can use it for their own promotional purposes in support of their music careers. This not only establishes a mutual respect between us, as a *quid pro quo* arrangement; it also forms an alliance between us

in the struggle felt by many reggae musicians who seek to promote Rastafari and positivity in a music industry dominated by negative messages.

Another step I have taken toward entering into the struggle is my partnership with the One Art Community Center in our efforts to acquire vacant land for farming and beautifying the neighborhood. Like promoting reggae and other “conscious” music, this project does not require me or anyone involved to profess the Rastafari faith. Furthermore, I am not among those who feel that the police are constantly scrutinizing their behavior because of their skin color or hairstyle, so it would be disingenuous of me to suggest that I am struggling in the same way as many other Rastafarians in the city, much less the Jamaican Rastafari community that dealt with a great deal of discrimination over the last century. However, in finding common ground and goals to which we aspire, my collaborators and I are able to work with a shared set of values in resistance against social and economic forces that remain incompatible with the Rastafari movement. In this context, my interviews and observations are means by which I might better understand the continuous struggles experienced by the Rastafari community in Philadelphia, as I learn of the ways in which cultural practices are used toward sustaining the community and its values.

In a tribute to his long-time research partner, the late anthropologist Carole Yawney, Homiak<sup>63</sup> describes the many challenges Yawney faced in attempting to establish a relationship with the Rastafari movement in Jamaica during the early 1970s. A white woman from Canada living and moving among the Rastafari in West Kingston, especially at a time when women were

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63. John P. Homiak, “When Goldilocks Met the Dreadlocks: Reflections on the Contributions of Carole D. Yawney to Rastafari Studies,” in *Let us Start with Africa: Foundations of Rastafari Scholarship*, ed. Jahlan Niah and Erin Macleod (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2013), 62-122.



virtually excluded from reasonings, naturally earned a great deal of scrutiny and suspicion. However, her persistence resulted in well over three decades of purposeful collaboration with the international Rastafari community, and her activism included offering expert testimony on behalf of Rastafari in Jamaica and South Africa.<sup>64</sup> Hoping to become part of a meaningful partnership such as this one, I am particularly inspired by the fact that Yawney “never professed a Rastafari identity” but “took Rastafari spirituality very seriously.”<sup>65</sup> I am reminded of a conversation with B. Davis in which I told him that I do not call myself a Rasta, and he replied, “Breddah, you a real Rastaman from ancient imes in the present trodding in the future!”<sup>66</sup> Collaborative ethnography is a challenge that requires much more than sharing information and resources; in the Rastafari community, it means moving with the movement. Homiak’s analysis of his partner’s approach eloquently describes what I have been striving for, and I will take these words as my marching orders going forward, in whatever community I may research:

Carole was one of the few academic outsiders to fully understand that to “move with” the Rastafari involved taking seriously their conviction that an ancient union between “knowing” and “being” was essential to being whole. Even today this remains the greatest challenge that Rastafari poses to researchers of the movement. Transcending the Cartesian dichotomy between self-and-other, knowing-and-being was simply one of the many ways in which Rastafari have validated their identity as “modern-antiques”. For Carole, this oxymoron is embodied in one of the most simple of Rastafari truths: “Words without works is death.” She became part of Rastafari through her “works” *for* Rastafari which would represent a lifelong commitment.<sup>67</sup>

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64. *Ibid.*, 105.

65. *Ibid.*, 109.

66. B. Davis, email message to author, February 2, 2014.

67. Homiak, “Goldilocks,” 87-88.

## Reasoning

The InI concept has intrigued me since I first heard it in Bob Marley's lyrics nearly twenty years ago, but I became especially curious about this topic after hearing this and other “I” words used frequently during my research trip to Jamaica in 2010. Other common themes from that brief study include the idea that, in the words of Bongo Shephan, "Music transcends all boundaries," along with the view that vibrations from words and drums have a tangible effect on the cosmos. In attempting to synthesize these lessons from my previous research and conversations with Rastafarians, I have been contemplating vibrations, expressivity, and the meaning-making, structure-defying power of language and music. My current studies in the field of cultural sustainability have helped me to frame my research questions through lenses borrowed from ritual theory, performance studies, and ecomusicology. While the ecological values of Rastafari are rather apparent in their diet and other efforts to live sustainably and in harmony with the earth, the struggles of reviving and sustaining African, Afro-Caribbean, and Rasta culture – or, alternately, of practicing culture in order to sustain people – are perhaps not so obvious to anyone who is unfamiliar with Rastafarian thought and expression. In this analysis of my fieldwork, I focus on the experience and practice of sounding, especially the utterance of “InI” and similar Iyaric terms, as efforts to create a more equitable – and therefore more sustainable – social order, one that celebrates the interconnectedness of all of creation, not just people.

Another goal of this analysis is to complement my own understandings of epistemology and postcoloniality with those of my Rastafarian interlocutors. Considering Homi K. Bhabha's

notion of the “projective past”<sup>68</sup> in my consideration of Rastafari’s Pan-Africanist currents, or Edward W. Said’s notion of “the native point of view”<sup>69</sup> in opposition to anthropological investigation, I hope that the voices of my collaborators will come through with the authority of experience within a living tradition. I do not pretend to resolve the problem of my representing a community that deserves to represent itself, nor do I propose any new notions of difference or Otherness; however, by examining the vantage point of the ethnographer as “I,” my reader and I might begin to consider this InI language as a possibility for co-understanding or co-presence in this reasoning.

Reflecting on some experiences at live music events, considering the liturgical character of reggae and Nyahbinghi performance, I begin by exploring how creative expression creates liminal spaces in which Rastafarians sustain and invent culture on a democratic or collective basis. This includes my observations of reggae and Nyahbinghi musical performance along with some perspectives from my interviewees regarding the relationship between music and their cultural identity. An analysis of views on word-sound power serves a two-fold purpose here, providing further examples of creative performance while situating the Rastafarian *I* within a unique cosmology as creator. I then examine this worldview further, considering Rastafari’s philosophy of “One Love,” its deep respect for nature, and its understanding of vibrations or “vibes” as an evaluative concept as well as a physical reality. Without suggesting any direct, historical connection between these Rastafarian notions and similar African philosophies, I show how musical and verbal vibration, as means of connection with others and the environment, are

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68. Homi K. Bhabha, “Freedom’s Basis in the Indeterminate,” *October* 61 (1992): 57, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778784>.

69. Edward W. Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 219-20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343582>.

important practices for individuals who are working to establish a knowledge of self as African. Finally, I identify the colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial contexts within which Rastafari has emerged and continues to assert its resistance against hegemony. Whereas *InI* has been useful in the past for placing the movement in opposition to Babylon – Great Britain and imperialism in general – the progression of Rastafari through Jamaican independence, globalization, and various current events has brought about new conditions in which its identity and purpose must be strategically sustained through its cultural life.

### **Communitas in Musical Performance**

When my band used to have a weekly gig on Wednesday nights, I would often be approached by regularly attending fans who would say things like, "Reggae Night is my church, man." One of the more fulfilling things about being a musician is hearing this type of comment from people in your audience, especially fans who come out on a consistent basis. Not only does it exemplify the dedication that results from admiration – when we like something so much, we often claim to follow it "religiously" – but it also affirms the spiritual component of the musical experience within which we, as musicians, hope to connect with our crowds. There are several such memories of that weekly Reggae Night that continue to teach me about the power of music to bring people together.

More recently, I have attended some shows where I witnessed certain behaviors that I might describe as religious in character. One band in particular comes to mind when I think about musical performance as ritual: Midnite, a reggae band from St. Croix, whose Rasta-themed lyrics and meditative roots influences are foregrounded in their live performances, as well as their recordings. But it is not just their devotion to Rastafari that makes these concerts such great examples of ritual phenomena. Reggae rhythms and lyrical content aside, the movements of the

band and its audience demonstrate a sort of liturgical quality that, I would argue, is more or less present in all concert performance. As I have observed these phenomena over the years, it has become increasingly difficult to reflect on comments such as, "Reggae Night is my church," without considering how the ritual process is at work in the events leading up to, during, and following a concert. Some of the traditions at rock concerts are familiar examples. A show might be scheduled for 8:00 PM, but the band might not start until closer to 9:00 if too many seats are empty. This signals a certain level of cooperation between audience and performer - not so much that the venue managers recognize ticket purchasers' desire to get their money's worth, but that the show is not quite complete without a full crowd to cheer on the band. Occasionally, after the band leaves the stage at the end of the show, the audience will remain, making noise, often holding their lighters up in the air or chanting, "One more song!" until the band returns for an encore. Such interactions begin to break down the dualities of performer/audience and stage/seating, even offering access into that "Holy of Holies," the backstage area where the band hides between sets and before the encore, allowing a sufficient level of anticipation to build before satisfying the demands made by the audience through chaotic but recognizable noise. In this way, audience and performer call and respond via structured and unstructured sound patterns, demanding responses to songs, solos, cheers, moments of silence, and various movements that are all too familiar for frequent concert-goers. When a performer is described as having a talent for "connecting with the audience," this reflects an awareness of the cues and cadences of contemporary concert performance that are expected in many popular music scenes.

For roots reggae audiences, especially where the Rastafari worldview is respected and embraced, the dynamic between performer and audience is often much more quiet and relaxed than in the rock concerts I have observed. Clapping and loud cheering is rare; instead, audience

members wave flags of red, gold, and green, sometimes uttering a response that resembles an "amen" more than a "woo hoo." A sort of marching to the beat is typical, in contrast to head-banging, spinning, gyrating, moshing, and motions common in other scenes. Eyes often remain closed for extended periods of time, perhaps suggesting that the music provides a meditative experience for the listener, more important than the event of a celebrity on stage. This varies from show to show, of course, as some performers are boisterous entertainers, while others remain relatively still for the entire show. The most energetic Rastafarian performers I have seen (Luciano immediately comes to mind) are nearly impossible not to watch, as they shake their dreadlocks, slap hands with audience members, and ask questions of the crowd, soliciting cheers for justice, Jah, blackness, herb, and other esteemed aspects of the Rasta faith.

I attended two Midnite concerts in 2013, and there were elements in both of these shows that I automatically associated with my own experiences in liturgical worship. The first show was at Wall Street International in Philadelphia, and the second at B.B. King's in New York City. Outdoor and indoor performances, respectively, the atmospheres differed to some extent: light rain outside, a more tightly packed audience inside; a 3 AM start time in Philadelphia, a midnight start time in NYC; an "underground" vibe at Wall Street International, a classy ambience at B.B. King's. Still, the ritualistic similarities were all there, from the smellscape of "incense" and essential oils to the movements and accoutrements of the audience.

At the Philadelphia show, there were several opening acts, which is not atypical of events in venues that want to cast their nets wide: by showcasing several local or somewhat popular bands, they can boost ticket sales, in some cases. Regardless of the venue or the event, however, most concerts feature at least one opening act, or multiple "openers" and a "main support" immediately preceding the headliner. These performances accomplish several aspects of the

overall experience: "warming up" the crowd, or as headliners often say, "Warming up the stage"; keeping people entertained, active, and perhaps educated, while the rest of the congregation arrives; providing an incentive for more people to come and bring financial offerings to the venue; and occasionally demonstrating a diversity of musical experiences available to the public – "something for everyone." As with many events in Caribbean culture, there was little concern for time throughout the day, and by the time the main support came on stage, things were over two hours behind schedule. Midnite has a sort of slogan, "Time is not counted from daylight, but from midnight," and they often delay the start of their performances until after midnight.

Between the main support and the headliner sets, the DJ played some classic roots reggae music very loudly, and it was nearly impossible to have a conversation. I attempted briefly to interview my friend with my camera, but he misheard the question, and he was so energized at that point that he could not stand still for the camera, anyway. Some people were dancing, others were huddling by the fire (wooden pallets burning in an old, rusty dumpster), trying to stay warm and dry, and some of us were standing a few feet away from the stage, watching as members of the band came out for soundcheck. Looking around, I was reminded of a candlelight vigil as the faithful stood patiently watching the altar (stage), many with candles (spliffs) in their hands. The anticipation built as some latecomers continued to arrive, until the DJ faded out the music and the drummer began playing softly. The crowd responded to this cue accordingly, quieting the conversation and turning their attention to the stage. If the players of instruments might be considered deacons or lesser clergy, the lead singer was the priest, perhaps performing his own personal backstage ritual. After the band quietly warmed up with a meditative groove, the venue host came out on stage with a sort of call to worship, introducing the band that needed no introduction, and the singer walked out on stage and began singing as he entered.

This was my fiancée's first Midnite show, and my second, so she was a bit upset with me for making her leave early, which was around 4:30 AM. But we were able to take in over an hour of this experience, one of the rare reggae shows that brings out even the most devout Rastafarians who somewhat resent the close association most people make between reggae and Rastafari. During the first song, she was standing next to my friend, a Rastaman, whose eyes were closed as he swayed in place ever so slightly. I am not sure what provoked it, whether or not she asked him something, but he leaned over to her and said something like, "This is a very meaningful experience for me." We were standing near the front, so she had not yet noticed that this quiet, peaceful demeanor was typical throughout the crowd. As I pointed this out to her, we also took note of the slight marching movements of those who were dancing, their arms occasionally swinging back and forth, their backs straight and heads lifted high, as if at attention or in prayer to Jah. Some people whistled, shouted "Rastafari!" and various terms common among the Rasta community, and a few people clapped after each song; but overall, this crowd exhibited a much more calm and reverent composure than that of the typical rock, hip hop, or reggae concerts I have attended. This "vibe" was even more evident at the New York show, where we witnessed more dreadlocks, more incense, and some Ethiopian Orthodox processional crosses, not uncommon in the Rasta community.

By contrast, the Luciano set at the Mann Center during the Reggae in the Park festival in 2012 was much more lively. There was not much dancing, but this may have had more to do with the constraints of the seats than the overall setting. Many Rastafarians were in the crowd, waving their flags and wearing their formal attire, but still displaying more energy, which is fitting for Luciano's more energetic brand of reggae. We saw no golden processional crosses, but I imagine they would have never made it past security. The event's headliner being Jimmy Cliff,



there were also a fair amount of non-Rasta audience members, as well as people who are largely unfamiliar with the reggae scene, so some of the crowd participation resembled that of a typical music festival. Still, Luciano made sure to fit some ritual elements into his brief set. His band warmed up the stage before he came out, and he began singing a slower, softer song backstage with his wireless microphone before walking out. He changed his attire twice during the set, from a formal outfit, to military fatigues, and at one point wearing a regal cape. Like Vaughn Benjamin, the singer of Midnite, Luciano took opportunities during his set to preach about his Rasta faith; but whereas the former had a more subdued tone, Luciano was more dynamic and actively seeking a loud response from the crowd.

In comparing concert performance to liturgical worship, I do not mean to suggest that there is a common formula for either sort of event, although there are certainly comparisons we could draw between various religious rituals and any given stage performance, especially when the music is spiritual in character. I simply wish to point out that participation in musical performance (whether as audience, performer, or some hybrid of the two) creates new dimensions of space and time in which liminality, anti-structure, and mystical transcendence are just as apparent as they are in those traditions characterized as liturgy and rite. Both are occasions, to borrow a description from Turner, “[W]hen the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance.”<sup>70</sup> Invoking this concept of spontaneous *communitas* or *subjunctivity*, Alice O’Grady writes of the UK’s underground club scene, “In this subterranean environment, conventional codes of behaviour are more relaxed, binaries begin to collapse (for example, divisions between day and night, spectator and spectacle, reality and

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70. Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid,” 44.

illusion) and participants are thus able to experiment with ideas, identities, and (re)constructions of self in a characteristically supportive atmosphere.”<sup>71</sup> Live reggae events in Philadelphia feature these phenomena at an intersection of Rasta spirituality and general counterculture sensibilities; the One Art Community Center, for example, hosts a wide range of activities, from roots reggae concerts and African drum workshops to electronic and jam band performances, sometimes featuring multiple genres in one event. The relationship between cultural identity and experience of *communitas*, if I may make some generalizations, underlines the difference in approaches to creation of liminal spaces and times. Whereas the trance and jam band scenes are much more heterogeneous and comfortable with a greater degree of experimentation, roots reggae attracts an audience that is sympathetic, if not complicit, with the concerns and activities of the Rastafari movement. Whatever political, theological, or nationalistic conclusions emerge out of the performance event, the roots reggae concert contains specific elements of purpose: identification within a community, connection with nature, and symbolic resistance against local or international manifestations of Babylon.

### **Rastafari and Reggae**

The following statements from Rastafarian musicians in the Philadelphia reggae scene exemplify common perceptions of the music as I have described it above: not only as a means of creating community through a ritualistic process, but especially as a way for Rastas to celebrate and (re)construct their identities. These comments were shared by both black and white individuals, so there are varying degrees of emphasis on Africa; however, for these speakers, Rastafari remains foundational to experiences of performing and listening to reggae music.

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71. O’Grady, “Spaces of Play,” 91.

This excerpt of my initial interview with Timi Tanzania in 2013 shows his concern for what he perceives as disunity among the African diaspora, something he believes that reggae has the potential to remedy. After some reasoning about divisions among and within religious groups, I asked him what he has learned from his experiences as a musician that informs his views about what he had described as “direct connection with the Most High.”

Ben: So, when you’re performing or at a reggae show, do you feel that there are certain rituals, conscious or subconscious – I mean, what about the experience at these shows helps you to, sort of, attain this sense of unity?

Timi: It’s a good thing that you ask that, Benjamin, because, you know, the sad factor is, this is 2013, and a lot has changed over the past ten, twenty, thirty years. And, ideally speaking, those things that were governed and written about years ago become more of a challenge today than ever before because of the amount of tactics that have been used by the powers that be, the system that be, in the society that we live in. Let’s face it: Bob Marley received a lot of airplay in the early seventies on white radio. Black radio didn’t play Bob Marley and the Wailers, but the message that Bob Marley and the Wailers brought was not necessarily a message for the world, but a message to black people primarily, ‘cause coming out of the Marcus Garvey prophecy and His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I’s leadership, we really had work to do in Africa, first and foremost. However, with the disunity that’s in place in Africa, which is the result of colonialism’s effect through the years, it’s been proven quite difficult to achieve this unity, particularly when there’s a lot of infighting, war and destruction, crime and violence.

So, these things are not only in Africa, because those Africans who have been displaced and might be around the world now, who still seekin’ some connection with their homeland, they realize there’s a plight, an ongoing fight in these various regions that they’re from. The message in the music, particularly in reggae music, has always been to soothe those sufferers, to that degree, no matter where you are. And this is what creates this international acceptance of the music, the message in the music, and the foundation of the music. The music itself – the drums, the bass, the guitar, the keyboards, the horn line: that is really what affects the listener.<sup>72</sup>

B. Davis, a reggae artist from Trenton, also discussed the importance of Africa. Although he may be categorized as a white man of European descent, during our first recorded reasoning, he spoke of his Italian roots leading back to Africa: “Everything comes back to Africa, because... even scientists say we started in Africa, right?” However, he made an important point

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72. Timi Tanzania, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, April 4, 2013.

about the universal appeal of reggae music, and this seems to motivate his performances and recordings as means of conveying the Rastafarian worldview:

[N]owadays every race of people come as Rasta, come in with that message. To me, that is the most – it bring me to like, amazing vibes, where I have hope for people. I have hope to keep doing music. Because we could easily go the other way and start going commercial, or just start saying things that are easily being said right now. But instead, we keep going against the grain and keep trying to make some progression. It's being made, man, I know it's being made. When I see guys like Fortunate Youth and those type of people, even the [inaudible] hittin' number one – that's reggae music. As long as you're talkin' some type of positivity in the music, I don't care if you're a Rasta or not. If you're influenced by Rasta people, well that's beautiful. And that's what life all about, what we're tryin' to do.<sup>73</sup>

Within the Rasta community in Philadelphia, one of the most visible differences lies between the Boboshanti Rastas, who consistently wear turbans, and members of the Twelve Tribes mansion or unaffiliated Rastas, most of whom do not consider dreadlocks or dietary guidelines to be compulsory. Many Boboshanti have expressed to me their resentment that Rastafari is often equated with reggae music, and some have indicated a belief that reggae is a negative influence that should be avoided; however, it is not unusual to see a few members of this more ascetic mansion at reggae concerts, especially when the artist is widely regarded as a Rastafarian whose lyrics are informed by the movement and its livity. Regardless of the degree of explicit spirituality in the lyrical content, the “positivity in the music” that B. Davis spoke about is perceived to have an effect on the audience. As Dan “Brawta” Poruban explained to me,

Some shows, you can actually sense the mansions. If you go to a really big show or an important show, you'll see the different sects. Even within a club or a venue, you see Boboshanti or – I guess that's more prominent because of the trappings, the turbans, and their, you know, their demeanor. But on a personal level, I can honestly say that I've never really felt that division. Now, that's my – I've never been made to feel like I've been outside, that there's not a welcomeness there. But I think at the same time, you can't help but be sometimes a little self-conscious, just because – I've always been as respectful as I can. See, that's where the living part of it is. Like what I was saying about, there's certain aspects obviously, just the tangible aspects, I guess like the surface aspects

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73. Brian Davis, interview by Benjamin Bean, Pennington, NJ, March 27, 2013.

of your pigment or your background. But as far as where your mindset's at, where your thoughts are at, I tend to gravitate more – you can feel those vibrations. And you may have one instance where you might not feel – “separate” is a good word; you don't feel any negative things, I never really felt any negative things on a personal level – but as soon as that might creep into your mind, there's always a counter vibration of togetherness that you feel.<sup>74</sup>

This notion of “vibes” or “vibrations” is a major theme in Rastafarian discourse, and I explore this further in my discussion of nature and interconnectedness below. For the present context of reggae music as a vessel for some of Rastafari's more universal values – togetherness, positivity, hope, progress, unity, soothing the sufferers, and “going against the grain” – I offer one final thought from Dubsmith, a producer of original music that blends reggae with various electronic elements. A Philadelphia native, Dubsmith has worked both locally and internationally, from Jamaica to Japan, and his collaborators include Rasta musicians who are very serious and vocal about their faith. While we were reasoning about what “InI” means to him, he spoke about the energy that he tries to convey through his music:

If you put the wrong elements in it, it's not what it should be – you know, you can make it electronic or anything – but you give it the wrong message. Me, I don't claim to be anything of any great spirituality, but I positively make spiritual-based dub, for that concept of InI. It's InI people. Most people that listen to reggae tune into that conscious vibe, the more culture. What Garnett say? Or Bob as well: “Help the weak if you're strong.”<sup>75</sup>

By citing two legendary Rastafarian reggae musicians, Garnett Silk and Bob Marley, Dubsmith framed the meaning and purpose of his music within a canonical Rastafari spirituality and consciousness. His statement that music is “not what it should be” if it has the wrong message and elements indicates a belief in an ideal or authentic form of reggae music that requires a commitment to positive elements, if not specifically Rastafarian traditions.

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74. Dan Poruban, interview by Benjamin Bean, Exton, PA, September 27, 2013.

75. Dubsmith, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, June 5, 2014.

## How to Burn Things with Words

Extending this consideration of musical performance into other expressive realms, we may explore how language – in particular, speech acts or speech events – also presents opportunities for creating alternate times and spaces in which cultural realities can be formed and unformed. Foley’s theory of Immanent Art offers a window into these creative possibilities of language, asking *how* words mean, rather than simply parsing the meaning or the structure of the words. According to this theory, “dynamic structure and idiomatic meaning” are the “two-part answer” to the question of why certain registers of speaking persist.<sup>76</sup> A register or a mode of speaking will “bend but not break,”<sup>77</sup> having in its flexibility a connection to a cultural experience from which it draws its meaning. Likewise, Bauman notes of the emergent qualities of verbal art that “there is a distinctive potential in performance which has implications for the creation of social structure in performance.”<sup>78</sup> By setting aside regular occasions for individual or public creative expression, be it conversation, concerts, or contemplation, we exercise our potential to create and discover meaning, to interpret and reinterpret, and to dissolve and resolve the boundaries we perceive in the very structures and environments of the rituals themselves.

This is perhaps a universal function of communicative faculties: a struggle to transcend a perceived separateness, an effort that begins and ends with testing the limits and potentials of the I. Rastafarian linguistic expression is a form of resistance, not only its wordplay and literal meanings, but in the power that is exercised through sound. As Chevannes writes,

[The Rastafari] have a slogan that says, "WORD, SOUND and POWER," a trinity. To them the word is both sound and power. It is sound not only because its effect is aural but

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76. Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 115.

77. *Ibid.*, 116.

78. Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” 305.

also because it is *capable of quality*, capable of being "sweet," of thrilling the hearer. It is power because it can inspire responses such as fear or anger or submission. The articulateness, tonal variation, pitch, and formalisms are the Rastafari version of the sweetness of the sermons in lower-class churches, and to describe this level of expression they use the word "to chant."<sup>79</sup>

The *quality* of sound, rather than the measurable and transcribable characteristics, may be understood in terms of perception, how the vibrations of a particular act are heard or felt by minds and bodies rather than recording instruments. In a phenomenological ethnography of linguistic and musical expression, while there is certainly room for transcription and technical description, it is within this particular notion of quality that we can frame an experience of expressivity in order to inform an analysis of cultural life. Word-sound power (alternatively written as "word-sound-power" or "word, power, and sound," in addition to Chevannes' usage above) is a Rastafarian concept that signifies the shared experience of sound quality, the agency and spiritual potential of a speaker, and the collective resistance against linguistic forms imposed by colonial rule. When a Rastaman "sounds" (speaks, chants, or beats a drum), quite often he is cognizant of the layers of meaning beyond the indexical definitions of his words or the theoretical components of his musical performance. His tone, rhythm, and timbre are all significant, along with the wordplay involved in InI language.

Manipulation of words is among the well-known aspects of Rastafarian cultural life, as it has been used extensively in reggae music, in which the oppressor (up-presser) is known as the "downpresser," understanding becomes *overstanding*, and the objective "me" is frequently replaced with an "I" that retains the individual's self-determination. Central to this way of speaking is the InI concept, the idea that all people share the same Iniversal (universal) I, which asserts equality while making a statement about the sort of objectification that, for example, the

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79. Chevannes, *Rastafari*, 227, italics mine.

early Rastafari movement resisted in colonial Jamaica. Yasus Afari, a Rastafarian dub poet and scholar, writes, "Consistent with the RASTAFARIAN philosophy of one love, self, family, inity (unity), oneness and humanity, the I and I language reflects the RASTAFARIAN concept of one-in-all and all-in-one; the one-for-all and the all-for-one."<sup>80</sup> In some cases, this re-creation of words is aimed at replacing syllables with word-sounds that reflect Rasta ideas: for example, *meditation* becomes *I-ditation*, *unique* becomes *I-nique*. In other cases, however, the beginning of a word is replaced with the letter I for no other reason than to reiterate the centrality of the I within the Rasta worldview.

The movement's value system is evident in the thoughtfulness with which Rastafari alter certain words with respect to the positive and negative attributes of each syllable. Consider a few examples I have gathered over the last few years, which, in addition to demonstrating word-sound creativity, also address concerns about technology and institutional power:

*Psalm One Forty-Love*: When a child was asked to read from the Bible in the Nyahbinghi tabernacle in Scotts Pass, Jamaica, she began by reading the Psalm number, 148, but she was immediately corrected. In the Jamaican pronunciation, the number eight sounds identical to the word "hate," so the final syllable is replaced with "love."

*Reducer*: Priest Kassa explained that he considers producers of popular music as people who are promoting negative values; therefore, he calls them "reducers" instead of "producers."<sup>81</sup>

*Re-legion*: Emphasizing the difference between Rastafari and religion, B. Davis asked me to consider the latter in reference to a passage in the Gospels in which Jesus encounters a demoniac whose possessors say, "My name is Legion, for we are many."<sup>82</sup> This pronunciation, "re-legion," ascribes a demonic influence to religion.<sup>83</sup>

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80. Yasus Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari: Jamaica's Gift to the World* (Jamaica: Senyacum, 2007), 114, emphasis in original.

81. Priest Kassa, interview by Benjamin Bean, Bull Bay, JA, November 18, 2010.

82. Mark 5:9, KJV.

83. B. Davis, interview by Benjamin Bean, Pennington, NJ, March 27, 2013.



*Tek-knowledge and Tell-lie-vision*: Jah1 mentioned both of these words in a reasoning about the control that technology and popular media have over society. Using the example of cell phones as evidence of how technology can take (tek, in his Jamaican pronunciation) away knowledge, he asked, “Back in the day, I would remember my home number, and now I don’t have my number what I remember it in my phone. I don’t remember new numbers, so where’s my knowledge?” and “Television – Tell-lie-vision.... Why you don’t call it that in the first place? ‘Cause that’s what it is!”<sup>84</sup>

Afari keenly observes that the spoken word is a means by which "thoughts, minds and persons can be transported" to the world that is being expressed through the sound.<sup>85</sup> As he demonstrates within his own writing and performance, the word-sounds of Rastafarian discourse "re-mould, re-shape, and re-direct the perception of both the Jamaican and the English language and... revolutionize and re-calibrate the mentality and psyche."<sup>86</sup> InI language strives to create or restore a harmony between the various components and meanings of spoken words, which Rastafarians assert has been lost or suppressed by the Babylon system. More than merely symbolic expressions of an imagined ideal, Rasta speech acts are intended as transformative energies, sounds that constitute a new reality. As performative communication, Dread Talk may certainly be described as a means of constructing a desired social order; however, Rastafarian perspectives seem to attribute a more tangible creative power to the performance of sound, the vibrations of which have a measurable effect on the cosmos. I have explored this aspect of word-sound power in my recent fieldwork, as I consider this creative process of communication with the I-niverse as an extension of the socially transformative power of speech. Placing the material world within the scope of linguistic communication, we can see how the environment and all

84. Jah1, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 21, 2014.

85. Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari*, 115.

86. *Ibid.*, 125.

living things might fall within "RASTAFARI's responsibility to free the people with the positive vibes, language, music and the creative energy of the Rastafarian Livity."<sup>87</sup>

In his posthumously released and influential work on the philosophy of language, *How to Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin discusses three types of speech acts in his theory of performative utterances: *locution* (the literal meaning of a statement), *illocution* (an act performed within the utterance, such as a request, an oath, or a pronouncement of guilt), and *perlocution* (the intended effect of an utterance upon an individual or group of listeners).<sup>88</sup>

Extending this theory to a consideration of religious language might reveal how perlocution is more than the psychological influence of language understood within a social context; instead, this sort of act might entail the tones, timbres, rhythms, and subtle elements of sound that accompany the words. This may also include a spiritual dimension that relates to the efficacy of a word-sound, such as a prayer or a spell. Titon, for example, discusses religious utterances in terms of belief: "The 'power' is in the belief; it is the power of faith, and for the believer it makes religious language meaningful and operative."<sup>89</sup> Although communication with God and fellow believers in sacred activity may be regarded and analyzed in the same way as other performative utterances, it may be appropriate to conceive of another category of speech act altogether. I would dub this genre *pyrolocution*, an allusion to the Rastafarian tradition of "burning" things with word-sounds. Fire has been an important aspect of Rastafari over the years, both as a symbol and a component of ritual, in burning herbs as well as dancing around the

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87. Ibid., 127.

88. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 91.

89. Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 207.

binghi fire.<sup>90</sup> Rastas often condemn wickedness with an utterance containing the words “fire” or “burn”; alternately, a statement of wisdom will often be preceded by the word “fire,” or this word may be used to express agreement, rather than “amen.” Perhaps because binghi fires are a much less common practice in Philadelphia, I do not hear this expression at home as much as I did in Jamaica. Instead, the concept of vibrations or “vibes” is more typically invoked to describe the creative and destructive power of speech; however, the importance of fire in Rastafarian discourse seems to be ubiquitous.

In another useful definition of "Word-Sound-Power," R.A. Ptahsen-Shabazz draws a connection between this Rastafarian principle and the Dogon concept of *Nommo*, which I will explore further. Noting the importance of "the accurate and proper use of the spoken word in defining, describing, and communicating reality," the author writes, "the Rastafari *overstand* that language in significant ways creates and governs external reality and should be used to bring spiritual clarity, positivity and further *overstanding/innerstanding* to that external reality."<sup>91</sup> Much in the same way that God/Jah spoke the world into existence (consider the repetition of "Let there be"<sup>92</sup> in the Hebrew creation narrative, along with the "Word"<sup>93</sup> of John 1), a human agent "creates and governs" reality through word-sounds. Cosmology aside, even in a strictly social sense, the Rastafarian articulates a new order in which individuals are no longer placed into a hierarchy of "I and Thou," but rather are given equal consideration and identical agency.

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90. Homiak, “Dub History,” Kindle Location 2268.

91. R.A. Ptahsen-Shabazz, *Black to the Roots* (Philadelphia: Those Four Sounds, 2008), 216, italics in original.

92. Gen. 1, NKJV.

93. John 1:1, NKJV. “In the beginning was the Word [λόγος (logos) in the original Greek], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The "InI vibration"<sup>94</sup> is one that resonates among the "members of a new race" for which Haile Selassie I appealed to the United Nations in 1963.<sup>95</sup> As this word-sound, "I and I," becomes more commonplace among Rastafarians and people around the world, perhaps it can ring in (literally or figuratively) an era in which common ideas about "you" and "others" no longer hold the human intellect captive to selfishness and discrimination.

### **Knowledge, Wisdom, and Overstanding**

“Rasta don’t believe – we know!”<sup>96</sup> With this assertion, Gregory (pseudonym), one of my Rastafari interlocutors in Jamaica stressed a point often articulated by members of the movement, that their faith is not one of belief, but of knowledge. While any particular Rastafarian may not parse these terms in depth, a simple consideration of the cultural context aptly illuminates this semantic discrepancy. First, in view of the movement’s rejection of colonial religious authority, “belief” may be seen as blind acceptance of dogma handed down by a superior, rather than the sort of knowledge gained by the experience of a free and independent person. Rastafarians reject the notion of a “pie in the sky” reward system for good behavior, an afterlife concept which, they argue, was designed to incentivize good behavior among slaves. As Marley famously sang, “Most people think great God will come from the sky, take away everything, and make everybody feel high. But if you know what life is worth, you would look

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94. Bob Marley and the Wailers, “Positive Vibration,” from *Rastaman Vibration*, ©1990, 1976 PolyGram, PolyGram TGLCD 5, compact disc. I have chosen this phrase here, and in my title, as a reference to this song, in which Marley sings, “If you get down and you quarrel every day/ You’re sayin’ prayers to the devil, I say/ Why not help one another on the way?/ Make it much easier.”

95. Haile Selassie. “Address to the United Nations General Assembly, October 6, 1963,” in *Selected Speeches of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I* (New York: One Drop Books, 2000), 368-78.

96. Gregory (pseudonym), interview by Benjamin Bean, Kingston, JA, November 19, 2010.

for yours on earth.”<sup>97</sup> Despite all of their rhetoric of hope, longing, and expectation for African redemption, Rastas insist that repatriation and the establishment of Selassie’s universal kingdom is a project that requires his followers to organize, centralize, and build the future with their own hands. This requires more than belief and its connotations of passivity, uncertainty, and weakness. As architects of a new world, the Rastafari must establish knowledge: confident, focused, and purposeful.

Anand Prahlad contrasts Rastafarian *knowing* with certain forms of Eastern enlightenment, arguing that the former is an experience based in cultural identity.<sup>98</sup> Individuals do not “convert” to Rasta; rather, they “realize” or “sight up” Rastafari as the fulfillment of an African heritage, a diasporic experience, or an identification with various aspects of African cultures and spiritualities. The ethnographic evidence throughout Charles Price’s *Becoming Rasta* supports the idea that a strong reference group orientation is a key component of Rastafarians’ self-concept, as it provides strategies for defending against – and more importantly, recontextualizing – the various stigma placed upon them within Jamaican society.<sup>99</sup> I situate this particular line of inquiry, dealing with creating and exploring meaning, within Prahlad’s discussion of proverbs. In his extensive work on Rastafarian use of this speech genre in music and everyday reasoning, Prahlad considers the levels of meaning exercised in each of these short utterances of cultural wisdom. While the linguistic forms I explore are not proverbs, in the usual sense, I find the following theory useful for this analysis.

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97. The Wailers, “Get Up, Stand Up,” From *Burnin’*, ©1990, 1973 by Tuff Gong, Tuff Gong 8462002.

98. Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom*, 13.

99. Price, *Becoming Rasta*, Kindle Location 2134.

When someone recites a proverb, Prahlad writes, there are four levels of meaning to be found within this speech act: the *grammatical* or literal meaning; the *social* meaning, that which is significant within a particular group context; the *situational* meaning, which depends on the circumstances for which the proverb is offered as a rhetorical device; and the *symbolic* meaning, or meanings, which emerge from the experiences, memories, and sensibilities of each individual speaker or listener.<sup>100</sup> A person may perform a proverb with the intention of creating meaning on one level more than others; however, each of these categories is virtually inseparable from the others, all of which may be more appropriately described as approaches to analyzing a broader meaning-making utterance. The situational significance of a proverb, for example, depends on the power of the proverb to evoke feelings and reactions by way of its symbolic implications; moreover, a skilled speaker can enhance the situational meaning by manipulating the grammatical level, adding a personal touch of improvisation, wordplay, or allusion to other cultural symbols. In a sense, the social level of meaning is much like the situational level on a larger scale, or a conglomerate of myriad situational meanings. By focusing on the social level, like Prahlad, we do not privilege one aspect of the proverb over another; rather, we approach the proverb as a product of collective, cultural knowledge-in-process.

Perhaps the most profound way in which the Rastafari have developed notions of identity, purpose, and morality is through the process of reasoning. This loosely structured style of conversation is viewed as a sacred activity, often accompanied by the use of their sacramental herb, and all participants are free to exchange ideas regarding issues of social, political, and spiritual importance. In this manner, the philosophies and priorities of the movement, typically pertaining to the person of Haile Selassie I and the mission of repatriation to Africa, are

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100. Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom*, 2.

articulated collectively as a cultural process.<sup>101</sup> Prahlad writes, “It is also in these contexts that the language is further honed and scrutinized,”<sup>102</sup> and I have witnessed this process during reasoning sessions, both in Jamaica and in the Philadelphia area. In the Nyahbinghi tabernacle in Jamaica, for example, members openly challenged each other on words such as “religion” and “fornication,” consulting a dictionary for clarification. Gregory, the same Rastaman who informed me that they possess knowledge, rather than belief, corrected me on my use of “you guys” during our reasoning with several bredren. “Guys” sounds nearly identical to the Jamaican pronunciation of “gays,” a category rather undesirable to many Rastafarians, so I was warned to be more careful to avoid that particular word.

In reasoning with two Boboshanti priests in Bull Bay, Jamaica, I heard many proverb-like statements, along with critiquing of word choice, woven throughout the statements of priests Kassa and Navandy. The example I give here was prompted by my asking about how they feel when they see non-black, non-Rastafarian musicians getting rich by performing reggae music.

Kassa: Well, InI no feel no way still because the Man say, “Elect of every nation, but yet one over all.” Because the Man say this is what every nation haffi come and do.... The Man say it a go be one aim, one God, one destiny.

Navandy: And God live inna everyone.

Kassa: So everyone now, dem haffi come... ya have a foundation, ya have a place. Dem come, dem get dem teachin’, dem know a fi do. Dem go back forward, build fi dem race... ‘cause everything outta the one order, same way.

Navandy: And His Majesty say the worst feelin’ fi any man could have is feelin’ bad at the next man’s success. So we wouldn’t feel bad at the next man’s success. We just glorify, ya know?

Bean: As long as that success is –

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101. Barnett, “Rastafari Dialectism,” 57.

102. Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom*, 24.

Kassa and Navandy: (in unison) Righteousness!

This exchange provides several examples of common cues for important statements made within reasonings: “The Man say” and “His Majesty say” signal quotes from Haile Selassie, Marcus Garvey, and even famous musicians like Bob Marley or Sizzla, often paraphrased. By announcing the authoritative source, the person relating the saying is demonstrating its social meaning. “The worst feelin’ fi any man could have is feelin’ bad at the next man’s success,” a teaching which the priest attributed to Selassie, is a direct response to my question – the situational meaning. The symbolic meanings may vary, but the key words here – worst, bad, success – along with the repetition of “feelin’,” evoked emotional and spiritual responses that were announced in the punctuating exclamation, “Righteousness!”

### **Vibrations in Sound and Intention**

Some scholars have noted the connection between the word-sound power concept and the idea of *Nommo* from the Dogon people of West Africa. While it is unclear to what extent the latter had any direct influence on Rastafari’s cultural evolution, there are some striking similarities worth mentioning here. As described by Jahn, *Nommo* is “the life force, which produces all life, which influences ‘things’ in the shape of the *word*.”<sup>103</sup> Within a worldview that perceives everything to be comprised of vibrations, the power of the spoken word gives each person, or *muntu*, an active role in the ongoing process of creation.<sup>104</sup> Of course, it is not only through sound that vibration is effected or channeled. Plants and minerals, especially those used in natural healing processes, are said to have certain vibrations that benefit various bodily and spiritual functions. I have discussed this phenomenon with an acquaintance in Philadelphia, Ras

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103. Jahn, *Muntu*, 24, italics in original.

104. *Ibid.*, 126.



Ben, whose work and writing on healing with crystals are informed by his Rastafari faith, and his research points to the idea that the vibrational nature of everything is a scientific fact, not a vague, spiritual tradition.<sup>105</sup> It is also not uncommon to hear Rastas speak of the sacramental herb as having or giving a vibe; Bongo Shephan, for example, suggested that a prayer recited over the herb could “give it a different vibration.”<sup>106</sup> Whether these aspects of Rastafarian thought directly descend from African traditions or have been discovered by individuals researching their roots, they seem to have a profound influence on Rastas’ cultural experiences, especially in music and language.

One of the challenges to my research lies in the fact that Rastafarians are not the only people speaking about vibes in various ways. The alternative healing community, for one, acknowledges the power of vibration in music, meditation, crystals, and chakras, and there is a great deal of dialogue and collaboration between these healers and the Rasta community where I work. However, I frequently hear more vague comments from individuals outside of these communities. A fellow musician, not a Rastaman, recently told me about “getting a weird vibe” from an audience, and it is not unusual to hear people describing uncomfortable feelings in these terms, or talking about a pleasant atmosphere as “good vibes.” For my Rastafarian interlocutors in Philadelphia, who are to some extent familiar with the variety of meanings that might be conveyed by the word “vibration,” discussing word-sound power and vibes is a process of controlling equivocation.<sup>107</sup> Jah1, my colleague at the One Art Community Center, explained his

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105. Ras Ben. *Rocks of Ages: Anu Edition* (Philadelphia: Those Four Sounds, 2008), 167.

106. Bongo Shephan Fraser, interview by Benjamin Bean, Red Hills, JA, November 23, 2010.

107. Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology,” 5.

understanding of two different meanings: “You might at a party and ya like, ‘There’s no vibes in the party’ ... and you might meditating and there’s vibration around.” Recalling the church music of his youth, he described the “feel” and the “vibes,” seemingly using the words interchangeably, and when I asked him if the nature of musical and word-sound vibrations is physical or spiritual, he replied, “It’s more like a spiritual kinda thing, vibration, ‘cause you’re attach with it, you’re a part of what you’re doing, if you really like the music. You’re playing the bass, you’re a part of it, that vibration you get out of the bass, and that’s you. That vibration is comin’ off of you.” He added that this vibration is “real,” repeating his point that “it’s you, it’s coming off of you,” and that the crowd can feel the vibration that a musician feels while performing.<sup>108</sup>

The last part of this explanation calls to mind what Alfred Schütz called the “tuning-in relationship,”<sup>109</sup> or what Titon has discussed in terms of “co-presence,”<sup>110</sup> yet it remains unclear whether the vibes experienced in sacred spaces or performance arenas are generally viewed as natural phenomena or as metaphors for similar feelings shared by individuals. Some insights I recently recorded at a reasoning seem to indicate that the former is the case, that word-sound power and Nommo indeed have much in common. To my question regarding the origin of vibrations, reggae singer Abijah Lioness replied, “The vibration come from the earth, the energy of the atmosphere, ‘cause we are made of all of that.”<sup>111</sup> Timi Tanzania explained his attraction

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108. Jah1, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 14, 2014.

109. Alfred Schütz, “Making Music Together,” *Social Research* 18 (1951): 79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40969255>.

110. Titon, “The Nature of Ecomusicology,” 17.

111. Abijah Lioness, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 21, 2014.

to music in foreign languages due to an “energy, a physical interaction that go with the word.”<sup>112</sup> And a comment by Dubsmith suggests that the different understandings of vibration – as either material or metaphysical – are not a universal distinction: “Absolutely, spirit and body is one. There’s really no separation there. Yeah, I believe that. You know, if your body is in a certain kinda mindset, and you’re thinking, ‘I’m gonna do good with my physical self,’ your spirit is only gonna – you’re not gonna be like, ‘Yeah, so I’m gonna do evil....’ No, you start to feel good; you’re like, ‘I’m gonna spread that... throw a little of that everywhere.’”<sup>113</sup>

My colleague Malaika Hart shared a sound about the nature of vibration beyond the realms of music and language: “Vibration isn’t only a sound thing. It transcends that. You don’t even have to say anything, and the vibration is conveyed.” Abijah Lioness replied, “Very true. Inna the InI, to the next InI. When ya truly are of positive energy, you don’t even have to really – you just know. You can tell straight off somebody that’s bad vibes, without even talkin’ to them.”<sup>114</sup> Considering how word-sound power is closely related to Rastafarian concerns over intention, or purity of heart, the lines between grammatical, social, situational, and symbolic meaning – or alternately, illocution and pyrolocution – begin to blur, and a speaker’s moral and social lives are intertwined with the utterance itself. The agency of an individual I or a collective InI imbues sound with its power, and, much like how the degree of Nommo depends on the

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112. Timi Tanzania, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 21, 2014.

113. Dubsmith, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 21, 2014.

114. Malaika Hart and Abijah Lioness, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 21, 2014.

stature of the muntu who utters the word,<sup>115</sup> the efficacy of a drum beat or word-sound may be enhanced by the righteousness of the Rasta who performs it.

While the rhythm and harmonies alone do not involve the same level of innovation applied in Dread Talk, these musical forms did emerge within a conscious effort to embrace certain African elements to the exclusion of influences from the oppressors and other Afro-Caribbean worship traditions,<sup>116</sup> such as Zion and Pukkumina, which were also viewed as Babylonian influences.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps more important than the African influences in the rhythms, attitudes toward drumming and chanting demand a profound respect for the instruments – Boboshanti Rastas require that a man wear a robe whenever playing the drum in an assembly – as well as uprightness or cleanliness of heart. As Bongo Shephan explained, “Spiritually, you is livin’ clean and doing the things that is upright and right, you can send message through those drums, and it have effect upon people and nations.”<sup>118</sup>

### **Bodies in Nature**

Rastafarian experiences and expressions of vibration are not only means of connecting with other people on social, spiritual, and moral levels; they are also very profound ways of “being in the environment,” within and without the parameters of the human body. In 2010, I had the opportunity to visit Priest Dermot Fagan at his community, the H.I.M. Haile Selassie I School of Vision, Bible Study, Prophecies, and Sabbatical Worship, in the Blue Mountains of St.

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115. Jahn, *Muntu*, 129.

116. Reckord, *Chanting*, 238-39.

117. M.G. Smith, R. Augier, R.M. Nettleford, *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*, (Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, 1960), 51.

118. Bongo Shephan Fraser, interview by Benjamin Bean, Red Hills, Jamaica, November 23, 2010.

Andrew, Jamaica. Fagan pastors a unique farming community, teaching the Rastafari faith with an emphasis on repatriation to Africa, along with some unique interpretations of the book of Revelation with regard to current events. While the focus of our interview was the appropriation of reggae music by non-black, non-Rasta musicians, some of the first thoughts he shared with me pertain to Nyahbinghi drumming. In contrast to reggae, which despite its roots in the Rastafari movement is often considered a non-sacred form (it is even shunned by some Rasta groups), Nyahbinghi drumming and chanting is considered "original" music, a pure form of worship. Every Rastafarian I interviewed in Jamaica made this clear distinction, cautioning me not to equate reggae with their faith and culture.

Priest Fagan described the "one-two order," another term for the Nyahbinghi sound, as a means by which Jah expresses himself mystically, the two-beat pulse symbolizing the cross of Christ, or "judgment to the horizon, and righteousness to the [plumb]." <sup>119</sup> This sound is "emanated and joined by the musical attachment, which mean the singing. 'Cause it not only the drum now reflect the one-two sound, but the songs that are sung in the operation of the churchical expression of the Nyahbinghi Order is so dynamic, meaning every song is sung with relevance, to reflect then ourselves as a people, traditionally and culturally." He continued by singing a song, "Over Land and Sea," expressing a common longing for repatriation, underlining his latter point about the lyrical content being a theological and cultural representation. This being a more obvious aspect of Rastafarian music, I want to return to his other point, the "emanation" and the "mystical" expression that comes through the pulse of the fundeh drum. When he made these statements, I was reminded of the "positive vibrations" I have often heard

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119. Priest Dermot Fagan, interview by Benjamin Bean, Blue Mountains, Jamaica, November 22, 2010.

Rastas speak and sing about. Is this some kind of divine energy? Are there unique powers within the vibrations of Rasta music?

"So we now that are the children of the slaves, while we are dancing now, all of the constant sound, one-two, one-two, it kinda ignite the fire that was dormant... in our inner soul, that been suppressed, that been held down. It ignite the soul now, back to something that was lost: our purpose of being." Attributing this igniting power to the Nyahbinghi heartbeat, Fagan did not condemn or dismiss the other musical traditions that evolved in Jamaica before Nyahbinghi was "discovered," as he put it; rather, he saw reggae, ska, Pocomania, and other Jamaican forms of music as expressions of black people "seeking same way to reflect themselves to the land that they were taken from." What makes Nyahbinghi music unique, according to Fagan and other Rastafarians, is that it existed from the beginning of human history, the original music. It may follow from this claim that the rhythm tunes the body into a more natural state of being.

So, when we look at the one-two now, the human body that is espoused then, or is invoked then, or is enticed to participate with the... dancin'... something leap. The movements, the gesticulation, and you see him make the move. Why? Because the sound is binding the body, or is forcing the body into that gesticulating way, indifferent to the other type of sounds you have got around.

Whereas he described popular forms of music as profane, vulgar, and lacking in "Christ-ness," the sacred sound of Nyahbinghi drumming "is unique because it binds the body, permanently and purposefully, onto the one-two reflection." Hence the need for a disciplined performance of the music; for example, the player of the kete or repeater drum, while being the only one who improvises among the Nyahbinghi ensemble, "will have to come right back to that one-two... him cannot go fast permanently, because that would have led him off into a mania, a poco spirit" (referring to the Pocomania drumming tradition).

Before we proceeded to talk about the significance of reggae and Nyahbinghi's African heritage, Fagan concluded his thoughts regarding the power of the drums with an idea that connects my research to the field of ecomusicology by constructing a relationship between drum sounds and environmental phenomena. This also speaks to the connection between theology and ecology within Rastafarian thought:

Can you imagine, if this is the cross of Christ, reflecting through the one-two order, emanating that power into the atmosphere. And for any group, and especially if that group is led through righteousness, is found executing that ordinance, or demonstrating that ordinance, which is the power of Christ... everything around it is bound that is negative. After seven or eight days, with that persistent constancy, judgment come in the earth. Sometimes it is tsunami, sometimes it is whirlwind, uncontrollable ferocity of winds, earthquake that shook, tidal wave that rise.

I met several other Rastafarians in Jamaica who expressed the same confidence in the Nyahbinghi sound: when they gather for a sabbatical service or a week-long binghi, the vibrations from the drumming and chanting have a very tangible effect on the world. As Bongo Shephan explained it,

So those three beats from the three different instruments, combined in one, carry a force of connecting with the universe, or connecting with people.... Like we say, 'Lightnin!' and lightning flash. We say, 'Thunder!' and thunder quake. We say, 'Earthquake!' and the earth shake. Because all these instruments, with word, sound, and power, unfold the fullness of the power of the Almighty, the Creator of the universe.<sup>120</sup>

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120. Bongo Shephan Fraser, interview by Benjamin Bean, Red Hills, Jamaica, November 23, 2010. Later on in this interview with Shephan, we were talking about the difference between using ganja recreationally and sharing a chalice (water pipe) of ganja for ritual purposes. I asked if a higher grade of the plant was used for ritual, and he replied, "It's the same herb; the only likkle difference... it maybe carry a different vibration, because it has been consecrated. It has been prayed over." The relevance of herb to this discussion becomes clearer in another comment from Shephan: "The herb works together with the reggae music and the Nyahbinghi music as a ritual, or a sacrament in our church." Likewise, Gregory at the Rastafari Business and Professional Association (RBPA) related to me that, "when the man smoke dem herb, the music what a come outta the Nyahbinghi house was more effective, because the herb carry him to that level of consciousness and revolutionary feelings."

Although it is not uncommon to hear participants in a binghi shouting these words, "Lightning," and so on, it should be noted that Shephan is talking about the drum sounds. Like the fundeh drum's pronunciation of "Do Good" with the one-two beat, all of the drums similarly articulate a two-syllable word that symbolizes and invokes an environmental force. Boboshanti Priest Kassa explained the sounds of the three Nyahbinghi drums in terms that bring the body into dialogue with nature:

The bass drum, which we know, is the breath, your breath. And that is the thunder, that what you hear roll in the heavens. The fundeh, that is the beat of your heart. And that is the earthquake. The kete now represent the lightning' – the repeater. Like how you see the lightning' flash, that is your meditation. So these three drums, when they play at one time, they connect to your spiritual and temporal.<sup>121</sup>

Kassa and his fellow priest, Navandy Thompson, went on to explain that this "authentically divine music" brings righteousness and salvation around the earth, and that one of the major problems with reggae music is that it does not keep the one-two beat at the forefront. However, several Boboshanti have explained to me that reggae has been a valuable "medium of the message,"<sup>122</sup> even if the music can also be used for negative, deviant purposes. Kassa explained, "Word without works is vain; word and works is life" – that is, the message might be present, but the rhythms are essential for the life-giving powers of Nyahbinghi.<sup>123</sup>

Of course, not all Rastafarians would avoid speaking about reggae music as a sacred activity. One of the teachers at Priest Fagan's school related, "I can't even explain it, because in reggae music, when it's authentic reggae music, ya get a whole lot of things from it. You can feel

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121. Priest Kassa, interview by Benjamin Bean, Bull Bay, JA, November 18, 2010.

122. Priest Oucal, interview by Benjamin Bean, Bull Bay, JA, November 18, 2010.

123. Priest Kassa and Priest Navandy, interview by Benjamin Bean, Bull Bay, JA, November 18, 2010.



the vibes, you can feel, you can just see the things, the words that are coming, you can actually see, you can visualize, you can relate to it.”<sup>124</sup> Her experience with reggae music seems to be one that recognizes “vibes” as an indicator of authenticity (which may be a marker of spiritual and/or cultural integrity), in which sight, words, feeling, and relatedness are all received from the music as much as any sound (notice that she did not mention hearing, listening, or sound). Ras Iyenton, an elder binghi man who described Nyahbinghi drumming as a “riddim of life that coincides with creation, that makes the rain fall, that ignites with life when sounds travel out,” also praised reggae music as “a riddim that makes you think,” which has the power to transcend boundaries. In what seemed like a word of advice to me as a reggae musician, he said, “Now when you take up your guitar, you take up your guitar strong, man. You shake off, you shell off those discriminator garments. You are one with life now, you are one with nature, you are one with the Most High.”<sup>125</sup>

Communion with nature through word-sound power is an idea that is connected to the InI concept, which refers not just to the I of individuals, but also to an omnipresent Jah. While reasoning with a small group in West Philadelphia in June of 2014, I asked for everyone to share their own definitions of InI. Timi included “the Creator” in his response, concluding with, “When I say ‘InI’, and when I hear ‘InI,’ I think I [pointing to himself], and I [pointing to everyone else], and the Most I [High].” Likewise, B. Davis interpreted the term, “I myself, and God, and all my brothers and sisters,” stressing the importance of including everyone. While Van

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124. Anonymous, interview by Benjamin Bean, Blue Mountains, JA, November 22, 2010.

125. Ras Iyenton, interview by Benjamin Bean, Tredways, JA, November 23, 2010.

de Berg's research reveals an understanding of this term as "individual and Jah,"<sup>126</sup> it does not explore the common use of the term to refer to a collective, whether all-inclusive or particular to the Rastafari movement. Other texts on Rastafari, as well as many reggae lyrics, demonstrate this sense of the word; however, it is uncommon to hear "InI" in reference to entities beyond God and humanity. After Timi and B. Davis shared their definitions, Ryoko gave a profound explanation, one that reflects common Rastafarian attitudes about nature, though its implications need further exploration in Rasta scholarship: "InI to me is I, the individual, and I, the other individual, regardless of a human being, or animals, or whatever. Anything that belongs in this earth, we're all part of it. We're all unity. That's what I believe. Everybody is in this unity, whoever is on this earth."<sup>127</sup> Although it may be too much to assume that her "whatever" includes all matter, more than just humans and other animals, Ryoko's statement echoes a common Rastafarian affinity for "anything that belongs in this earth," and it is clear that the utterance of "InI" is valued as a way of expressing and effecting the unity of creation.

The vibrations that Rastafarians ascribe to word-sounds, drumming, intention, their dreadlocks, their holy herb, and all of creation are, as many of my interviewees have acknowledged, difficult or impossible to explain. These comments about the ability to feel the vibes and "actually see" the message in the music, the binding force of the one-two rhythm on the body, and the relationship between chanting and nature, seem to reveal a way of perceiving vibrations, not just with the ears, but with all of the body, with all material and spiritual being. In this regard, music and language, in all of their rhythmic, tonal, and timbral qualities, present possibilities for co-presence, for one I to resonate and co-inhabit the space and time of another I,

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126. Van de Berg, "Rastafari Perceptions," 167.

127. B. Davis, Dubsmith, Ryoko, and Timi Tanzania, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, June 5, 2014.

without inhibiting the vibrational agency of another. And certainly this is not limited to relationships between human beings; by striking a drum or uttering a word with any intention, we emanate our being into all sorts of beings, living and non-living, in dialogue with all. As scholarship continues to address questions of interconnectedness, sacred space, sustainability, and environmental justice, vibration may be a useful concept for reconsidering experience as something beyond the parameters of the body, or the I. When I-and-I – that is, any collective – share a vibration, especially in the form of creative expression, we may begin to notice the interplay between words, rhythms, cognition, and all of nature. While this phenomena has been explored in theories of “flow” and “communitas,” I suggest that bodily and shared experience of vibration merits further discussion with consideration for ecological concepts, such as human-as-nature or “being the environment.”<sup>128</sup>

### **Bodies in Babylon: Cultural Sustainability or Postcolonial Survival?**

Bhabha’s notion of the colonial or racial gaze<sup>129</sup> is useful in considering some elements of visual culture associated with Rasta identity. Black skin is one, of course; however, I have given some thought to another Rastafarian symbol that has been a topic of discussion in some of my recent reasonings in Philadelphia: dreadlocks. A marker of Rastafarian identity for the last half-century or more, the dreadlocks hairstyle has also become popular among non-Rastafarians

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128. Gibson-Graham, “A Feminist Project of Belonging,” 6. When I proposed a panel topic for the Ecomusicologies 2014 conference, I offered the title, *Vibration as Being in the Environment*. Andrew Mark, one of my co-panelists, suggested we add the word “Dialogic” and put the word “in” in parentheses: *Dialogic Vibration as Being (in) the Environment*. This consideration led me toward a reflection on a point by Gibson-Graham about connection as “an ethical act of subsuming ourselves within others’ as well as our own materiality and tuning into a dynamism that does not originate in human action.”

129. Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66-84.

around the world, and this seems to have contributed to a compromising of the significance of the symbol. Jah1, who typically wears his long locks under some type of head covering, shared with me that it is “just a hairstyle,” and one should not assume a person’s commitment to Rastafari solely based on appearance.<sup>130</sup> To this point, there are many Rastafarians who display few or none of the traditional identifiers: Brawta, a white Rastaman with very short hair, frequently quotes the Morgan Heritage song I mentioned earlier: “You don’t haffi dread to be Rasta.” Where members of the movement live and work among non-members, there are varying degrees of interest in sustaining the tradition of avoiding combs and razors; I speculate that this diversity of motivation corresponds to a spectrum of opinions on the neo-colonial gaze: the expectations, arising from the popularity of reggae music and its accompanying stereotypes, projected onto Rastafarian bodies.

Natty Rebel spoke about the mixed reactions he received when he cut his dreadlocks after growing them for over fifteen years:

A part of me felt a little insecure ‘cause I’m used to having that crown on my head, or just the extra weight that reminded me every day, or people looking at my silhouette as opposed to just looking at my face. I was surprised at the amount of love that I still received from the Rasta community. People still called me Natty.

Later he returned to the topic:

It was different. Some people walked right by me ‘cause they didn’t recognize me. You know, a lot of the “Whoa!” You have some people that were like, “Nooo! Why’d you cut ‘em?” And then I had some people, outside of the Rasta community, that were just like, “Oh, you look so much better without – I can see your face now.” So it was a little bit of everything. I can’t say that I really miss them, unless I’m around a large congregation of people with locks. One thing: even when I had locks, I used to hate when people would come up to me and be like, “Oh, man, I used to have locks, and mine were this long.” So I told myself I wasn’t gonna be one of those people that were like, every time I see a

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130. Jah1, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, April 28, 2014.

dread, like, “Yo, I used to have locks!” ‘cause like, it’s cool, but at the same time, it’s like, “Alright, that was the past, bro; what are you doing now?”<sup>131</sup>

Natty’s remarks indicate a tendency toward expectations, within and outside of the community, of a stereotypical Rastafarian appearance. I have heard mention of similar objectifications with regard to Rasta culture in Philadelphia: clothing, diet, ganja smoking, and musical skill or preference are all among the characteristics inscribed in the imagined, exoticized body at the intersection of the reggae scene, urban life, and Rastafarian identity.

It may be the case that Rastafarian word-sound power, in whatever context, is a more easily sustained tradition, given its inherent emphasis on widely accepted values: righteousness, justice, peace, and love. While non-Rastas can appropriate dreadlocks, ganja, and other more tangible forms of heritage, Rastas can continue using sound in innovative ways to combat the forces that threaten to compromise the significance of their cultural symbols. Viewed in this way as weapons, word-sounds remain a reliable source of protection for the Rastafarian speech community.

It may also be the case that the notion of a quintessential Rastaman as an Afro-Caribbean “man-of-words”<sup>132</sup> is also a stereotype that risks diminishing the valuable linguistic practices I have discussed here. Perhaps my own inquiry is one more gaze of otherness among those that unwittingly perpetuate the marginalization of the movement. I prefer to think of my research as part of a broader collaboration, based in shared values and sound practices (ethically and aurally speaking), that calls for reasoning rather than investigation, discovery of cultural opportunities rather than examination of cultural objects. Whether or not I succeed in this aim, it seems that

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131. Natty Rebel, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 28, 2013.

132. Roger Abrahams. *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 2.

reasoning – to whatever extent it may be sustained as a “Rastafarian” tradition – sustains the Rastafari community, sustains opportunities for sharing of knowledge, and sustains possibilities for being in the world through word, sound, and power.

## **I, Ethnographer: A Reflection on the Ground**

When I approach people for interviews or permission to observe their community activities, I am fortunate that I do not have to introduce myself as an anthropologist or a religious scholar. Asking questions about deeply held beliefs or personal feelings is a process that always risks awkward moments, suspicion, and even rejection. Discussing these topics with members of a Pan-Africanist, anti-colonial, and often marginalized movement becomes especially problematic, especially when the person asking questions is a white male from the suburbs of a city with a long history of racial division. I often get an uncomfortable vibe from an individual or group when I say that I would like to learn more about their culture through their unique perspectives; I sense a hesitation, an uncertainty of the purpose, but not necessarily a suspicion of my intentions. If I were to emphasize the scientific aspects of my research, I suspect I would not receive as many enthusiastic volunteers; however, by explaining this work as a part of my graduate studies in cultural sustainability, I am able to find common ground with some Rastafarians, whose social and environmental concerns intersect with several of the academic discourses that inform this new field of study. Still, there are inevitable challenges in recording interviews on topics that are important to communities, and I doubt that this opportunity would even be granted to me if it were not for my identity as a local musician.

I rarely play music with anyone outside of my band, but we have had the privilege of playing at local venues with other artists who are respected as Rasta musicians. To some extent, I believe, the rapport I have gained with the Rasta community is because of my band's commitment to playing roots reggae as tightly as possible, rarely fusing it with any style that is not appreciated by this community. While our lyrics do not explicitly state a Rasta message, the compatible themes of peace, love, hope, and justice seem to provide additional common ground

on which I have earned the respect and trust of several Rastafarians over the years. My familiarity with the speeches of Haile Selassie and the philosophies of Marcus Garvey, both central to the Rastafari faith, have enabled me to demonstrate an academic interest in the movement, rather than a mere curiosity in an exotic culture popularized through reggae. This genre is, however, a sacred form of expression for many individuals, so being able to quote the proverbs and expressions transmitted through reggae songs has proven to be just as important in establishing relationships as my historical and ideological knowledge of Rastafari. The ease with which some Rastafarians have introduced me to their bredren, on the basis that I am a reggae bassist and singer, is a testament to the common belief that music transcends boundaries.

Being a musician and student of cultural sustainability is not always enough to break through all boundaries, however. For Rastafarians who are especially motivated by social justice, participation in any sort of collaborative project or study should serve some greater purpose; if nothing else, the people who are initiating or benefiting from the work should be viewed as contributors toward a better world. In my case – and I believe this could be said of many ethnographers today – I want to avoid positioning myself as some kind of helper who can empower a community to represent themselves and their culture. Empowerment and recognition are wonderful goals, but if I am not personally invested in at least some aspect of the community's cultural life or social concerns, what business do I have documenting their daily lives and struggles? If I did not find so much inspiration toward action in Rasta philosophy, along with a sense of spiritual fulfillment from Rastafari's cultural traditions, I might think of myself, and be thought of, as an outsider exoticizing a group and its way of life. However, in addition to our similarities in interests and motivations, my Rastafarian colleagues and I have some quite literal common ground: the vacant lots we are trying to acquire in West Philadelphia;



the soil we are amending on these lots as we plant a variety of healthy fruits and vegetables; the murals and other aesthetic enhancements we introduce into the neighborhood; and the stages and venues where we perform our positive music. By digging into the same dirt, harmonizing, and transforming the landscape and soundscape together, we have established more than trust: we are achieving I-nity, a shared sense of purpose and co-presence that informs our reasonings.

In my past research, and certainly during my first few years as a reggae musician, I did not enjoy such a meaningful connection with the Rastafari community. Like many white and non-Rasta musicians in the scene, I occasionally became preoccupied with questions of authenticity, authority, ownership, and acceptance. While not all Rastafarians or Jamaicans in Philadelphia were dismissive of our efforts, we were also limited by time, money, and the many restraints that hinder collaboration among musical communities; our band was doing our thing, other bands were doing their thing, and there was little room for anything else. Singing songs about peace and harmony, equal rights and justice, and “InI” provided all of us with a sense of fulfillment, but the nature of our work inhibited us from connecting to anything beyond the business, and certainly not to the roots of reggae music. Even my undergraduate research project was rushed, narrow, and at times, impersonal. I had read a few books on Rastafari over the course of a decade, studied the music of a few classic reggae artists, and initiated a few thoughtful discussions about music and identity, yet I had failed to establish any deep relationships with the people who shared so much of their time and insight with me.

“Did you find what you came for?” asked George Ions, then High Priest of the Nyahbinghi Order, just before I ended my third and final visit to the tabernacle at Scotts Pass, Jamaica. When I smiled and thanked him and the bredren for their hospitality, I realized what I had found: not the answers to my questions, not ethnographic data, and certainly not some

important, new perspective on cultural property rights. In that moment, a warm and sunny afternoon following a Sabbath worship service in the Jamaican countryside, I learned what Rastafari is: people. People living together, sharing sacred space, reasoning and chanting together, and longing for a common home. While I may have been a conspicuous visitor, mostly unfamiliar with their songs, and a stranger to some of this community's hopes and goals, I felt somehow connected and grounded in this place, perhaps due to the Sabbath rituals and the overall atmosphere. In this context, I look back on one of my final conversations that day, one of only two occasions on that trip in which someone seemed to be trying to persuade me into the Rastafari faith, and now I realize that this was not an attempt at conversion, but connection.

“What is the I’s name?”

“Ben.”

“Ben – come to Rastafari, find Iya Ites (higher heights).”

### **Believing in Boundaries**

After my brief study in Jamaica, I received a message from John Homiak, the Smithsonian anthropologist who had connected me with my guide and hosts in Red Hills, right outside of Kingston, and who had just looked over some of my reflections from that trip. He challenged me to think about the extent to which anyone within the Rastafari community had made me feel like an outsider. My “otherness” was certainly blurred during this experience: I had the appearance of a non-Jamaican, non-Rasta, white man, and I know people took notice of my presence, often confusing me for other white males who had visited previously; however, I cannot count the number of times that I was told, “Jah no partial,” that is, anyone can be a part of this community, regardless of “race, color, or creed,” as one Nyahbinghi priest assured me.<sup>133</sup>

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133. Ras Sasse, interview by Benjamin Bean, Scotts Pass, JA, November 22, 2010.

Those first two categories, race and color, are common themes in Rastafarian discourse and music, and while they are not simple issues, I can understand the flexibility with which Rastas treat these categories in judgments of who is or is not a legitimate Rastafarian. What remains a puzzle for me is this issue of “creed”: how is it that I am often included in a Rasta’s idea of “InI” when I do not profess a belief in the divinity of Haile Selassie?

This question has been answered, in part, by the notion that Rastafari is a “divine conception of the heart,” to quote Morgan Heritage,<sup>134</sup> and not necessarily a matter of following cultural or religious behavioral codes. I still wonder, however, how it is that one can deny some of the central components of the faith yet be regarded as within, or at least connected to, the movement. Despite the diversity of expressions and social structures among the various Rastafarian communities, as well as the absence of initiation rites in most groups, I would still expect a sharper distinction between members and non-members based on, at the very least, some kind of outward identification of oneself as a Rastafarian. The fact that such discrimination seems to be lacking may be due, in part, to the legacy of resistance against colonial norms, including the religious institutions that require acceptance of specific tenets of faith and morality. Another possibility is that Rastafarian identity, being at an intersection of several loyalties and motivations, is assigned or claimed primarily in relation to specific sociopolitical situations, albeit still perceived as an “inborn conception”<sup>135</sup> for all of humanity. This paradox, Rastafari as a permanent, eternal identity that takes on meaning in individual agency or collective action rather than permanent features or generalizations, reveals possibilities for relationship within the community based solely on behavior or intent. Rastafari’s insistence that their teachings are

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134. Morgan Heritage, “Don’t Haffi Dread.”

135. Price, *Becoming Rasta*, Kindle Location 2790.

knowledge, rather than belief, further elucidates the preference given to experience and conscience, rather than specific expressions of ideological or cultural solidarity. I do not mean to minimize the role of tradition in sustaining Rastafarianity, but it is evident that the dynamics of Rastafarianism as a movement prioritize participation over explicit identification through initiation rites and creeds.

The role of the Bible in Rastafarianism illustrates this point. With several years of education in Christian teachings and interpretations of the Old and New Testaments, I naturally consider Rastafarians' interpretations in light of my own conclusions or what I have learned from biblical scholars. Some Rasta individuals or entire communities adhere, to various degrees, to the scriptures' regulations for sexuality, observance of the Sabbath, and maintenance of hair and clothing. Prophecy also holds an important place in Rasta thought, the most obvious examples being the return of Christ in his kingly character, as Haile Selassie I, and the repatriation of the Israelites (the African Diaspora identified as such) to their promised land. Beyond these basic doctrinal foci, the use of Bible verses and stories serves a more universal purpose: demonstrating and sharing wisdom by applying the text to current events. I recall a few reasonings in which I had the minority view about gender roles, sexual morality, race, and religion, and the underlying cause of the difference in opinion was a divergence in interpretation of a passage from the Bible, or a different understanding of church history. In one of the most telling examples of this, on one occasion when I was reasoning with three elders, one of them mentioned a passage in the Bible that declares that homosexuals "shall not inherit the kingdom of God."<sup>136</sup> I politely replied that the same passage includes drunkards, thieves, fornicators, and others, who, despite their transgressions against biblical law, do not receive the same level of condemnation from Rastas or

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136. 1 Cor. 6:9-10, KJV.

Christians. The discussion then turned toward the question of whether or not homosexuality is “natural,” and our different views on the debated scripture were not resolved; however, I was able to enter more deeply into this Rasta activity of reasoning because of my familiarity with the verses being discussed. Despite my age, race, nationality, and lack of affiliation with the movement, these well-known elders continued to show me respect as we reasoned – over a beer, I might add.

While some Rastafarians have rejected the Bible or questioned the integrity of the text as handed down through Christian institutions,<sup>137</sup> a general knowledge of its stories and teachings can serve as a sort of cultural lexicon to facilitate communication, especially in divine reasoning. The tensions associated with interpreting and accepting the Bible are paralleled by Rastafari’s engagement with scientific inquiry and cultural discourses, as well. Although opinions naturally vary, evolutionary theory is often viewed with skepticism because of its association with atheism. On the other hand, Rastafarians cite the discoveries of evolutionary anthropologists as evidence that the first humans came from Africa. Cultural anthropologists have also been treated with caution, a stance that makes sense in light of Jamaica’s colonial past; however, if scholarly work can advance the message and positive image of Rastafari, or if an ethnographic study notes a connection between an ancient African tradition and a modern cultural practice in the diaspora, it may be welcomed among an otherwise anti-academic Rasta community. The various disputes over the divinity, death, and political career of Selassie also suggest that a person’s own conclusions are secondary to the intent of their participation in the debate, especially whether or not they respect the emperor and the goals of African unity and repatriation. These apparent contradictions and ambiguities demonstrate the legacy of struggle that has emerged from cultures

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137. Price, *Becoming Rasta*, Kindle Locations 3425-3426.

of slavery, betrayal, colonial and post-colonial violence, and continued exploitation in the Caribbean as well as in communities around the world where Rastafari is being embraced. Unsure of who is an ally and who is a “bag o’ wire” (betrayal), Rastafarians collectively and delicately author a narrative of identity that is flexible and open yet ever conscious of “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” deceivers who seek to keep the world in mental slavery.

### **Ethnographic Roadmaps and Navigating Vibes**

One afternoon in Kingston, on our way to Bobo Hill, Shephan and I stopped at an Ital restaurant owned by Priest Fagan. This was my opportunity to meet the priest, explain my research topic, and arrange a time to interview him at his school in the Blue Mountains. As we sat outside of the restaurant with a few of Fagan’s bredren, I explained that I was a reggae musician, and I wanted to understand how Rastafari people feel when white people perform this genre of music that came out of the black liberation struggle. Shephan began to respond, and his voice suddenly shifted into an impassioned tone as he insisted that Rastafari condemns racism. This caught me off guard, and I wondered if I had misspoken or somehow implied an accusation that their ideology was racist, so I quickly apologized for any miscommunication and attempted to explain the context of my research in more clear terms. At this point, everyone started to laugh, and one of them walked over to me to reassure me that I had not upset anyone, but this was just the way the Rastafari reason with each other: “Rasta is a people of fire, so we speak with fire.”

On other occasions, I witnessed people speaking in this register, and I am still not sure if I should characterize the tones of voice as anger, excitement, or something else altogether. The fact that the topics of discussion that seemed to evoke such responses were religious or political in nature may indicate that an aggressive form of word-sound power is more likely to be

employed in contexts of reasoning when central tenets of the faith are called into question. I wonder how many times I have mistaken a heightened tone of speech, facial expressions, and hand motions for anger or personal attacks, rather than an excited participation in a powerful exchange of ideas. Being much more familiar with the way people talk in Philadelphia, I do not experience this confusion at home the same way I did in Jamaica. Near the end of my visit, Shephan told me that some people thought I had looked “lost” when I first visited the tabernacle but more comfortable on my last visit. I gave him a very simple explanation for this: I could barely understand what was being said by the people around me with their thick accents and patois, but I started to be able to follow along after a few days. In addition to the common problems in understanding different English dialects and accents, the cultural influences on tone and body language present serious challenges for any analysis of discourse.

The other side of this issue involves how I, as an ethnographer, am being understood – the *vibe* I am giving through my questions. Regardless of whether my accent or choice of words is decipherable in any given setting, the content of my questions can evoke or provoke a wide range of feelings, thoughtful responses, lively discussion, or confusion, all of which may be influenced by my relationship to the group and how I have framed my line of questioning. In the example above, our brief discussion at Fagan’s restaurant was initiated by Shephan, and my ability to explain a bit about the background and motivation for the study may have affected how my controversial questions were heard. Despite the short time frame of my research in Jamaica, I was fortunate to have Shephan to introduce me to people as “a friend of Jakes [John Homiak],” which saved me the trouble of earning their trust. In some cases, I had to demonstrate some knowledge of Rastafari beyond reggae, usually a teaching of Garvey or Selassie, in order to be taken seriously. I have learned the hard way, however, that the possibility of being

misunderstood is an inevitable part of the ethnographic process and, perhaps, a very valuable one. My interview with the late High Priest George Ions continues to teach me this lesson.

Shephan and I arrived at the priest's home on the tabernacle grounds about an hour before the beginning of the Sabbath service. I had met the priest and some other elders outside of his home just before the service one week earlier, and I had taken that opportunity to explain that I was researching Rastafarian perspectives on the participation of white people in reggae music scenes around the world. The elders who were present at that time responded to my summary of this topic by stressing three points: reggae is only a small part of Rastafari culture; Rastafari is for everyone, regardless of color, race, or creed; and they were among those who taught Bob Marley about the Rasta faith. Sensing that the elders were uninterested in discussing the topic any further, I shared some of my own experiences with what seemed to be resentment from black Rastafarians and reggae fans in the Philadelphia area, and I said that I could understand where this might come from: Marcus Garvey wrote about the importance of black people developing their own industries independent of white influence or support, yet white people who had never gone through the black liberation struggle in Jamaica were capitalizing on this cultural tradition that grew out of the Rastafari movement. Some nods and further discussion from the elders indicated that they were glad to hear of my familiarity with Garvey's teachings and the historical context of reggae music. The service began shortly after this discussion, and I did not record any interviews that day, as I had wanted to observe and be mentally and spiritually present for the experience. I returned on Wednesday and conducted a few interviews, but Priest George was busy and suggested that I interview him before the next Sabbath service.

When we returned to his home, George was lying down on his couch, resting a recently broken foot. He did not seem particularly eager to be interviewed, so after he and Shephan



discussed some administrative concerns, I set up my camera and promised to be brief. This was, by far, the most awkward conversation I had during my entire trip to Jamaica. Most of the priest's answers were brief, and there were times when I may have been trying too hard to get him to elaborate on his thoughts, or I may have been asking questions that he had no interest in discussing. On my third attempt at soliciting his thoughts on the appropriation of reggae by people who are not ethnically or culturally connected to the black liberation struggle, the priest seemed to be getting tired of this line of reasoning.

Bean: There are songs that come to mind about slavery. Bob Marley sang about it, Gregory Isaacs sang about it. Would you be skeptical at all if I started singing those songs right now, and say maybe that's not an honest thing, that I can't really feel that because I didn't go through that myself?

George: Well, really, that question is very tedious for I, yes, to tell you if you could go through it or not. You within yourself would have to know if you can go through it. For many can go through it, as plenty can go through. No, I wouldn't have it, for as I told you, "A remnant from every nation [must praise His Majesty]." So where there the words is, one can go through the works, for the words are free to each and every man.

With only one week of formal experience in ethnographic research, I felt discouraged and unsure of myself at this point. Not only was my research topic "tedious," according to one of the most respected elders in the Rastafari movement, but I was also having difficulty finding people to interview. Talking to a stranger about faith is not something many people are comfortable with, especially not when they have to sign a three-page consent form to do so. On top of this, I began to wonder whether my questions were even relevant.

Bauman and Briggs note the power dynamics at work in the dialogic processes of analyzing performances and texts. "To be sure," they write, "the exercise of such power need not be entirely one-sided; our interlocutors may attempt to control how their discourse will be entextualized and recontextualized. These processes have significant implications for the

methods, goals, and not least, ethics, of our profession.”<sup>138</sup> More recently, in his proposal for “an anthropology of interviewing,” Briggs has suggested ways in which ethnographers may more thoughtfully and ethically approach this sort of research. One of his suggestions is helpful for the type of situation detailed above: “Attend to ways in which interviewees and people who refuse to participate attempt to subvert the communicable cartographies and pragmatic constraints that researchers use in attempting to structure interviews.”<sup>139</sup> Priest George’s response was one of several forms of subversion performed in response to my “cartography” – that is, my positioning of various values, symbols, and ideas, including my self-positioning as musician, student, white, American, and Other. While some Rastafarians refuse to participate, others have succeeded in redirecting conversations toward topics that are more meaningful for them. What the priest said to me was an act of redistributing the power within our reasoning: my construction of a perceived authenticity contingent upon race and heritage was delegitimized, not because George denied the existence of such a perspective within the movement, but because his priority was to proclaim the importance of praising Selassie through the universal words and works. In retrospect, I think of his short answers and challenges, such as “Why not?” and “That question is very tedious,” as the beginning of my own “fieldwork enlightenment.”<sup>140</sup>

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138. Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, “Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155959>.

139. Charles L Briggs, “Anthropology, Interviewing, and Communicability in Contemporary Society” *Current Anthropology* 48 (2007): 566, doi: 10.1086/518300.

140. Barre Toelken, “Fieldwork Enlightenment,” *Parabola* 20 (1995): 35. I refer here to Toelken’s account of his realization, after forty years of studying Navajo tales, that “fieldwork, which is often viewed as a means of coming up with more artifacts or texts for study, needs to be reexamined as a model for human interaction. We already have plenty of ‘things’ to study; what we lack is a concerted effort to understand fieldwork itself as an interhuman dynamic event with its own meanings and contextual peculiarities.”

## Thinking Too Deeply

“I don’t go deep into stuff,” Jah1 told me in response to my philosophical questions about the InI concept. I had been asking him about vibrations, especially in the context of his experiences as a musician and the church music he has heard throughout his life. When I turned the conversation back toward my own theoretical considerations, he seemed uninterested in this direction. “I look at life as simple,” he continued. “There is wrong, and there is right.... Think about what you do before you do it.” Although Jah1 is a man of few words in most social situations, I wonder if my questions in recent interviews were “tedious” for him, as well. I often get the feeling that I am overanalyzing ideas and activities that others experience as straightforward and mundane. By asking about various cultural phenomena as objects of scientific inquiry, I may be introducing perspectives on everyday occurrences that members of the community had never considered. I have few reservations about participating in cultural invention in this way, and I hope that I can play a positive role in any community where I study or work, accomplishing what Titon’s friends among the Old Regular Baptists called “help[ing] us look at ourselves.”<sup>141</sup> However, having discovered new ways of looking at myself through ethnographic experience, I am learning about my tendency to ask complicated questions about things that, for many people, cannot or should not be analyzed.

Some scholars<sup>142</sup> have noted the absence of various dualisms, such as sacred and profane, in Rastafarian cosmology. Dubsmith’s assertion that there is “really no separation” between body

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141. Titon, “Knowing Fieldwork,” 32.

142. Mervin Alleyne, *Roots of Jamaican Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), 157, and Barry Chevannes, “Rastafari: Towards a New Approach,” *New West Indian Guide* 64 (1990): 127-148, doi: 10.1163/13822373-90002020.

and spirit<sup>143</sup> seems to confirm this observation; however, other statements seem to indicate a differentiation between mind, body, and spirit. Denise Martin connects this trichotomy, along with the dualism of good and bad vibrations, to West African concepts such as *muntu* and *nyama*.<sup>144</sup> Although these may be familiar concepts to Rastafarians who read and reason on a regular basis, I wonder if my interview questions along these lines have been inappropriate or alienating to those who “don’t go deep into stuff” and have never given much thought to the nature of spirit or vibration. When I asked Rastafarians in Jamaica about music belonging or being owned or claimed by a cultural group, the discussion often shifted to the terminology of intellectual property rights. At that time, Homiak told me that this concept was a fresh one in Rastafarian discourse, possibly indicative of recent developments in the organization of the movement. Clearly, someone had introduced the community to this legal issue, and this demonstrates the diffusion that is always taking place, not only due to the influence of ethnographers, because most cultural groups are not isolated, and certainly not Rastafari. My particular challenge came to light when I tried to ask questions about authenticity and belonging, concepts perhaps too abstract for people who were more concerned with reparations and repatriation. Because my questions emerged from my own interests and experiences, it was difficult or impossible, in many cases, to communicate their relevance to the movement.

While my tendency to “go too deep” might complicate the phenomenological aim of learning about a person’s experiences from within their own frames of reference – and I certainly want to be more cognizant of this in my fieldwork – I believe that an analytical approach is valuable, not only for social scientists, but for the vitality of the community itself. A musical

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143. Dubsmith, interview by Benjamin Bean, Philadelphia, PA, September 21, 2014.

144. Martin, “Pan African Metaphysical Epistemology,” 211, 217.

analogy may be helpful here. When I play with another musician for the first time, it helps to have a common vocabulary, but inevitably, one of us has a deeper knowledge of music theory than the other. This can make learning a song difficult, maybe more complicated than necessary, especially in reggae and other genres for which musicians do not always have a common method of counting time or communicating about melody and harmony. For many musicians, playing by ear and teaching by demonstrating, rather than using formal notation, are the most effective approaches to practice and performance. However, this does not mean that the introduction of an advanced concept in music theory will make an untrained group's music any less authentic, sincere, spontaneous, or enjoyable. I know many musicians who play primarily by ear, but they occasionally refer to chords or scales they have learned from formally trained musicians, and these concepts function as useful guidelines without compromising the informal character of the music. Likewise, it may be possible for an ethnographer to frame a discussion with philosophical or anthropological concepts that are unfamiliar to most members of a community, without taking away the community's ability to represent itself on its own terms.

### **Confidence in I**

A reasoning at the Rastafari Business and Professional Association (RBPA) in Kingston, at the midpoint of my research in Jamaica, taught me a great deal about myself, both as an ethnographer and as a musician. Gregory said that white people should not want to "attain to black," so I asked if that is how he perceives white reggae musicians. The subsequent comments helped me see that, in addition to overthinking things, maybe I was too concerned with what other people think, seeking approval or vindication for my participation in something that, I felt, was not quite mine.

Robbie: Let me ask you, what are you trying to achieve? Why do you play reggae music?

Bean: Because, for many years now, for fifteen years or so, it's the music that most speaks to my heart, rhythmically, lyrically. I'm a bass player, so especially the bass lines in a lot of reggae music really move me more so than in other music. And that's why. Same thing with some hip hop and jazz music. Rhythmically, I feel it more.

Shephan: What you must realize, that there's a part of us in you.

Gregory: And the I is now agitatin' for that liberation. The part of I a what [that is] in the I want to be liberated. Because one heart, ya know? One heart.

Bean: Well, if I had never answered that question for you, what do you think I would have said?

Robbie: That's the thing – I would not presume to try and answer. That's why I end up asking you. Right now you are still here standing on your own two feet. I am not taking away from you your being or your manhood, who you is. You have traditional cultures where they don't presume like that. One of the faults, for want of a better word, even coming from the white race, is that, is to presume on others, based upon their own understanding. Although you go feel that you been to the heights of intellectual experience and everything, you don't have everything. And that part that you don't have, you gonna take a chance and presume on it. But when you presume upon someone else, look, be prepared to be presumed upon.

Gregory: And you say where your feelings come from. You say it a while ago: your heart. That makes you be one, InI. That make we be one, because you feel what we are feelin' ... because of the heartbeat.<sup>145</sup>

While I am not convinced that Rastafarians, or people of “traditional cultures” in general, do not project certain feelings or attitudes onto non-Rastas and non-black people who participate in their valued traditions, I have given some serious consideration to Robbie's comment with regard to my fieldwork as well as my music. Eliminating all bias may be impossible, and while I can use some common sense and cultural knowledge to approach my research thoughtfully, I am not sure if I am able to avoid presumption when raising a question or a topic of discussion. I can, however, “be prepared to be presumed upon,” asking the questions that are important to me without fear of being misunderstood or judged for the way I look, talk, or think. Rasta history

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145. Robbie (pseudonym), Gregory (pseudonym), and Shephan Fraser, interview by Benjamin Bean, Kingston, JA, November 19, 2010.

provides many examples of individuals being persecuted for their beliefs and appearances, so I should not be discouraged by a few misunderstandings and rejections, but I may still take them seriously as opportunities to learn more about Rasta perspectives. I had one such opportunity at this same reasoning, not in response to any personal criticism or rejection, but with regard to the slogan of “black supremacy,” which some Rastafarians still profess. As some of these bredren have explained to me, “supremacy” refers to the first humans being African, and the term should not be equated with “superiority” or “domination.” Robbie seems to interpret the term as an expression of equality and resistance against white hegemony:

Now, we didn't create it, we don't create racism, because in ourselves, we don't elevate ourselves to one above the other. But if we are in a situation where we are downpressed, the only ting that may rise you is a consciousness to put yourself back on top. But if you are insecure when I stand in my supremacy, which is just my own self, you feel insecure about that, I have a problem with you because you are insecure.... So black supremacy for the Rastafari is really just a self-preservation, which is the right of all people, which is a natural doing of all people.<sup>146</sup>

When he said this to me, I noticed four words above the rest: “if you are insecure.” This resounds in my head whenever I approach an interview on faith, race, or anything that may be too deep or tedious. An ethnographer, especially one seeking common ground and collaboration with members of another community, should not be so concerned with the implications of perceived difference.

Moving forward, I carry those words Gregory shared with me: “The part of I a what in the I want to be liberated.... That makes you be one, InI. That make we be one, because you feel what we are feelin’.” I want to be liberated from the boundaries I create and those created for me. This is much easier said than done, simple in theory but constantly challenged in the field. When attending the Boboshanti tabernacle in Philadelphia, for example, I could not avoid the visible

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146. Robbie (pseudonym), interview by Benjamin Bean, Kingston, JA, November 19, 2010.

differences, my unfamiliarity with the liturgy, and the sense that many of the people in this congregation did not want to be objectified through research. One of the members, the acquaintance who invited me to attend the Sabbatical worship service, had turned down my request for an interview, and he seemed annoyed that I was asking about reggae music. One of the priests spent a fair amount of time with me after the service, explaining the faith and the iconography at the tabernacle, but he told me rather sternly, “I don’t want my name in no book,” so I decided against pursuing any sort of documentation or interviews within this particular community, for the time being. Still, I have not allowed this obstacle to stand as a complete barrier between the congregation and myself. Walking into that house required a level of courage that I may have lacked prior to 2013, but it also required a genuine respect for the EABIC, a willingness to display reverence by wearing the proper attire, bowing to every man and woman as they came and went, and clapping and singing along during worship. A confidence in my own I, as well as a confidence in the right to self-preservation of this community, regardless of our differences in opinion on supremacy and nationalism, is an important step toward dialogue. Cultural partnership or collaborative ethnography may not always be likely to emerge from this respect, and it may be the case that some of Rastafari’s sacred spaces – literal or ideological – can never be accessed without making various theological leaps that I am not currently prepared to make.

Despite these challenges, I continue to learn that, through confident, honest reasoning and making music together, difficult connections can be achieved – or, more accurately, the interconnectedness of everyone and everything within our environment becomes more and more apparent. Without sacrificing my agency or allowing myself to be defined by an external



authority, I can reimagine the I beyond the limits of my physical and cultural bodies, realizing the presence of InI, achieved in the midst of difference through the power of sound.

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