

THE POLITICS OF REPARATIONS IN RASTAFARI LIVITY AND REGGAE

Chevy Eugene

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the role of the Caribbean creative imagination in advancing the Caribbean reparations movement. To support my hypothesis on the role of the arts in reparations, I examine the politics of reparations in reggae music by my exploration of the studio albums of the most influential reggae artist - Bob Marley. The four themes underlined are: emancipation, chant down Babylon (destruction of the neoliberal construction of the world), repatriation, and the promised land.

Dread, Natty Dread now,
Dreadlock Congo Bongo I.
Natty Dreadlock in a Babylon,
A dreadlock Congo Bongo I.
Eh! Children get your culture,
And don't stay there and gesture,
Or the battle will be hotter,
And you won't get no supper.

- Bob Marley – Natty Dread



Introduction

The Caribbean creative imagination plays an integral part in the makeup of the cultural identities of the region, which are expressed through the arts produced by Caribbean nationals in the Caribbean or its diasporas. Rex Nettleford (2009) asserts that the creative imagination is critical in the process of decolonizing the spirit in the continuing pursuit of dignity, belonging, self-actualization, and purpose in the post-colonial world (p. 35). By engaging with the Caribbean creative imagination, this paper explores how the politics of reparations is conveyed in the Rastafari movement's creative sounds of reggae, by examining the lyrics of cultural icon Bob Marley. Reggae offers a perspective utilizing the "gaze from below," (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 11) through the "traditions of the oppressed" (Bogues, 2012, p. 30); that is, it offers a counter-narrative to Eurocentric epistemes in its creative and rhythmic sonic articulated from the "non-human." Marley's music has been selected because of its impact on cultural, political, and social movements in Jamaica, the Caribbean, and globally. In the Caribbean context, I believe that the reparations discourse should be centred on the advocacy for redress for the genocide of Indigenous People, transatlantic slavery, chattel slavery, and indentureship; however, my approach for this piece focuses primarily on restitution for transatlantic slavery. When this paper speaks to reparations, it refers to the challenge of repairing wrongs that were committed in the past and that have determined the framework of the present (unless defined otherwise). It does not focus primarily on the redistribution of wealth but, more importantly, on sovereignty and a shift of the global power dynamics.

In my analysis, the Marley albums explored were *Burning* (1973), *Natty Dread* (1974), *Rastaman Vibration* (1976), *Exodus* (1977), *Kaya* (1978), *Survival* (1979), *Uprising* (1980) and *Confrontation* (1983). My reference to the work does not follow a linear timeline but goes across time and space to draw from Marley's liberation songs. In her analysis of Marley's music, Carolyn Cooper (1995) asserts that the sound and lyrics are a mixture of "scribal and oral literary influences" (p. 117). The

scribal influences are mainly grasped from the Bible (according to Rastafari's interpretation) and are traditionally transmitted orally. The latter originates in Jamaican philosophy, a collective of culture and traditions across generations (Cooper, 1995, p. 117)—the everyday lexicon of a nation's people. My analysis of the lyrics does not claim authority over the artwork's meanings but works with Marley's openness to various interpretations of his music. In an interview, when Marley was questioned about the meanings of his album *Kaya*, he responded, "[y]ou have to play it and get your own inspiration. For every song have a different meaning to a man. Sometimes I sing a song and when people explain it to me I am astonished by their interpretation" (Wilson & Hall as quoted in Cooper, 1995, p. 118).

Reparations

In my examination of Marley's creative and liberating artwork, the themes of redress that have been conceptualized are inspired by how some of the ideologies of Rastafari livity is conveyed in his music. Additionally, the themes were developed by how my dissertation project has taken up decoloniality, referencing Frantz Fanon (1965, 1967, 2004, 2008), Sylvia Wynter (2006, 2015), and Anthony Bogues (2012).

The first theme, emancipation, speaks to the process of decolonization one must experience for internal liberation. It can be expressed as an awareness of "self" that takes place when the newly liberated human embraces Rastafari livity. Additionally, the notion of emancipation is reflective of the seventh Rastafari principle—the ability to "reason" or to be "reasonable" (Williams, 2008, p. 17). As such, for one to have the capability to hold discourse as a Rastafarian, an internal liberation must occur.

The second theme, chant down Babylon is recognized in Rastafari philosophy as destroying the contemporary modern global system. The third tenet of Rastafari principles is to counter oppressive forces that take place across racial lines. That same rhetoric of the destruction of "Babylon" permeates through reggae; and Marley's music is a prime example.





Fig. 1: Quentin Vercetty. (2021). Rastafari Redemption

The third theme, repatriation, highlights the physical, mental, or spiritual return to Africa. Repatriation is one of the pillars of Rastafari liv-ity, and as such, it is the fifth precept of Rastafari principles.

The final theme, promised land (access to land), is an extension of repatriation (the “move-ment of Jah people” (Marley, 1977)) into a new space—“Zion” (the land of God). This last, builds from the previous three themes that transcend the emancipated, chant down Babylon, and repatriated (physically, mentally, and spiritually) Ras-tafari in acquiring a central aspect of liberation—land. My usage of repatriation is tied to the idea of creating something new that is independent from Babylon’s influences. The four themes are interconnected and work to formulate what Black radical reparatory justice requires: the liberation of self, destruction of the global capitalist system and the establishment of just realities in decolonial spaces. More importantly, the themes do not occur in any particular order. Rather, they inter-sect with each other at various points. Further-

more, it is essential to note that my final selection of the music referenced is in accordance with the songs that most strongly support my hypotheses.

Emancipation

My construction of the reparatory theme in Mar-ley’s music, emancipation, speaks with Fanon’s (2004; 2008), Wynter’s (2015) and Bogues’ (2012) articulations of decolonial thought. In my analy-sis of Marley’s music, emancipation is associated with the decolonization of the former colonial subject, mainly the descendants of the “living corpses.” In one of his most renowned musi-cal sounds, “Redemption Song” (1980), Marley stresses the importance to “emancipate your-selves from mental slavery” in order to achieve liberation. Fanon (2004; 2008), Wynter and McK-ittrick (2015), and Bogues (2012), similar to Mar-ley, outline emancipation as a process that must occur internally. Marley (1980) sings:

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our minds



Have no fear for atomic energy
 Cause none of them can stop the time
 How long shall they kill our prophets
 While we stand aside and look? Ooh!
 Some say it's just a part of it
 We've got to fulfill the book.
 (Redemption Song, 1980)

Marley carries that internal decolonization sentiment in the chorus of the iconic sound. He emphasizes the importance of liberating your mind from the hegemonic structures that have historically and currently suppressed Black life (“atomic energy”) via racial capitalism. He concludes by reverting to the “book”—the Bible—and promises made by the “Lord” to His/Her people. There, we can observe the connection of theology and emancipation in Marley’s creative sound expression.

Chant Down Babylon

Although one can chant down Babylon regardless of their acceptance of Rastafari’s teachings, the process of emancipation (the circular motion of redemption and self-actualization) positions that individual to be more heightened of the colonial and neocolonial “situation”—the violent manner in which “Babylon” functions. The “new human”—liberated person (Rastafarian) can now directly speak to the horrors of “Babylon,”—as addressed in Marley’s musical track “Babylon System” (1979) for instance. Rastafari’s call for the dismantling of the system, presents synergies with Fanon’s (2004), and Wynter’s (2006) postulation of the destruction of the system to create new possibilities detached from Eurocentric ideologies. From his 1973 album *Burning*, in the song “Rastaman Chant” he sings:

Hear the words of the Rastaman say:
 “Babylon, you throne gone down, gone down;”
 Said I hear the words of the Iyaman say:
 “Babylon, you throne gone down, gone down;
 And I hear the angel with the seven seals say:
 “Babylon throne gone down, gone down”
 (Rastaman Chant, 1973)

Marley places Rastafari as prophets who foretell the obliteration of the system that is built to

exploit the working class, subaltern, and poor people—specifically Black people. The Rastaman or Rastafari adherents in their stage of emancipation, recognize the collapse of the modern world and utilize scriptural references to support their belief. In the above extract, Marley starts the verse with the chants of the “Rastaman” who prophesies the destruction of the racial capitalist global system. In her assessment of Marley’s taking up of “Babylon” in his music, Cooper (1995) states, his “apocalyptic imagery of imminent collapse graphically suggests the fall of Babylon and the implosion of the political system” (p. 121). The passage “I hear the angel of the seven seals,” is taken from the book of Revelation—a book that speaks of the destruction of the world and the return of the Black Christ (as interpreted by Rastafari) to battle the anti-Christ.

Repatriation

Repatriation is the fifth principle of the spiritual Black Power movement (Williams, 2008) and is one of the most popular themes in the creative expression of reggae, which is reflected in Marley’s musical sermons. Reggae is continuously utilized by Rastafari to speak on their politics of freedom, or as Clinton Hutton (2010) coins it, “repatriational freedom”—that has its origins in West African spiritual practices that were violently disrupted by transatlantic slavery (p. 33). Rastafari’s socio-political history, the livity’s embracement of African culture and advocacy for the “return” to the continent (more specifically Ethiopia) since the movement’s origin, have inspired repatriation to be a tenet of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Reparations Commission’s 10-point reparations plan (Matthews 2017, p. 96). According to Rastafarian elder Ras Ishon Williams (2008), Rastafari’s fifth principle was inspired by Marcus Garvey’s notion of “Africa for Africans at home and abroad.” Furthermore, he postulates that repatriation begins with the mind and heart that recognizes one’s immediate environment and can also lead to actions that will result in the “return” to Africa. Marley’s track “Exodus” (1977) from the album with the same title captures the promises that come with embracing Rastafari livity—oppression and salvation via “Jah Kingdom.” Marley (1977) sings:



Men and people will fight ya down
 When ya see Jah light.
 Let me tell you if you're not wrong
 Everything is all right.
 So we gonna walk—all right!—through de roads
 of creation
 We the generation
 Trod through great tribulation.
 Exodus, all right! Movement of Jah people!
 Open your eyes and look within:
 Are you satisfied (with the life you're living)?
 We know where we're going
 We're leaving Babylon
 We're going to our Father's land
 (Exodus 1977)

The first two lines in the above passage speak to Rastafari as an emancipated being. Marley indicates that when one becomes self-actualized in the knowledge of Rastafari, they will experience oppression from the system. This is evident in how Rastafari have been historically treated in the Caribbean, specifically in Jamaica. The stanza concludes by stating that Rastafari must “trod through the great tribulation” which means the obstacles that practitioners of the faith experience when they take on the spiritual Black Power livity.

Promised Land (Zion)

The final aspect of the reparatory justice, as taken up in Rastafari praxis, is the component of land—the promised land (Zion). Part of the foundation of Rastafari livity is built upon the access to ownership of land away from “Babylon,” leading to sovereignty. Garvey’s (1986) philosophy in his expression of the Black Nationalist tradition, also included the ownership of land, but more importantly the title of property on the African continent to create a new Black-led nation. Although Garvey never got to execute his agenda of repatriating to the continent (Liberia), some Rastafari adherents were able to fulfill his vision to a certain extent by repatriating to Shashamane, Ethiopia, in the early 1950s. Marley, in his music, captures the full reparatory experience in Rastafari thought with the ultimate end goal of making it to the promised land. The process of emancipation takes place through accepting

Rastafari teachings, equipping the believer with the necessary intelligence to “reason” in order to chant down Babylon. This subsequently leads to repatriation, from the trenches of “Babylon” to the promised land. Marley speaks to this Rastafari teaching in the song “Zion Train” from the *Uprising* (1980) album. He sings:

Zion train is coming our way
 The Zion train is coming our way
 Oh, people, get on board
 Thank the Lord
 I gotta catch a train, 'cause there is no other station
 Then you going in the same direction
 (Zion Train, 1980)

In the above stanza, Marley is encouraging the adherents of the faith to get on “board” the train that will take them to “Zion” (the promised land). It is safe to argue that the “train” is the movement of Rastafari, with the ticket being the acceptance of the teachings and philosophies of the “Black Power movement with a spiritual nucleus” (Mutabaruka, 2021). For Marley, the notion of arriving in the promised land after completing his prophetic work is underscored in “Rastaman Chant” (1973). He sings:

I say fly away home to Zion (fly away home)
 I say fly away home to Zion (fly away home)
 One bright morning when my work is over,
 Man will fly away home
 (Rastaman Chant, 1973)

Upon arriving in the promised land, “Mount Zion,” Marley encourages the adherents of Rastafari to celebrate in the holy city where Jah resides on his throne by “jamming” (dancing/ “skanking”). Moreover, the promised land, similar to the theme of repatriation, is not limited to being “elsewhere” but can be the place where one stands, a state of being, and physical land, where one can dwell in freedom. As my work has argued thus far, it is safe to assert that “Mount Zion” is located in Ethiopia, where Jah has provided the practitioners of the livity with land.

Conclusion

In my exploration of Bob Marley’s music, my



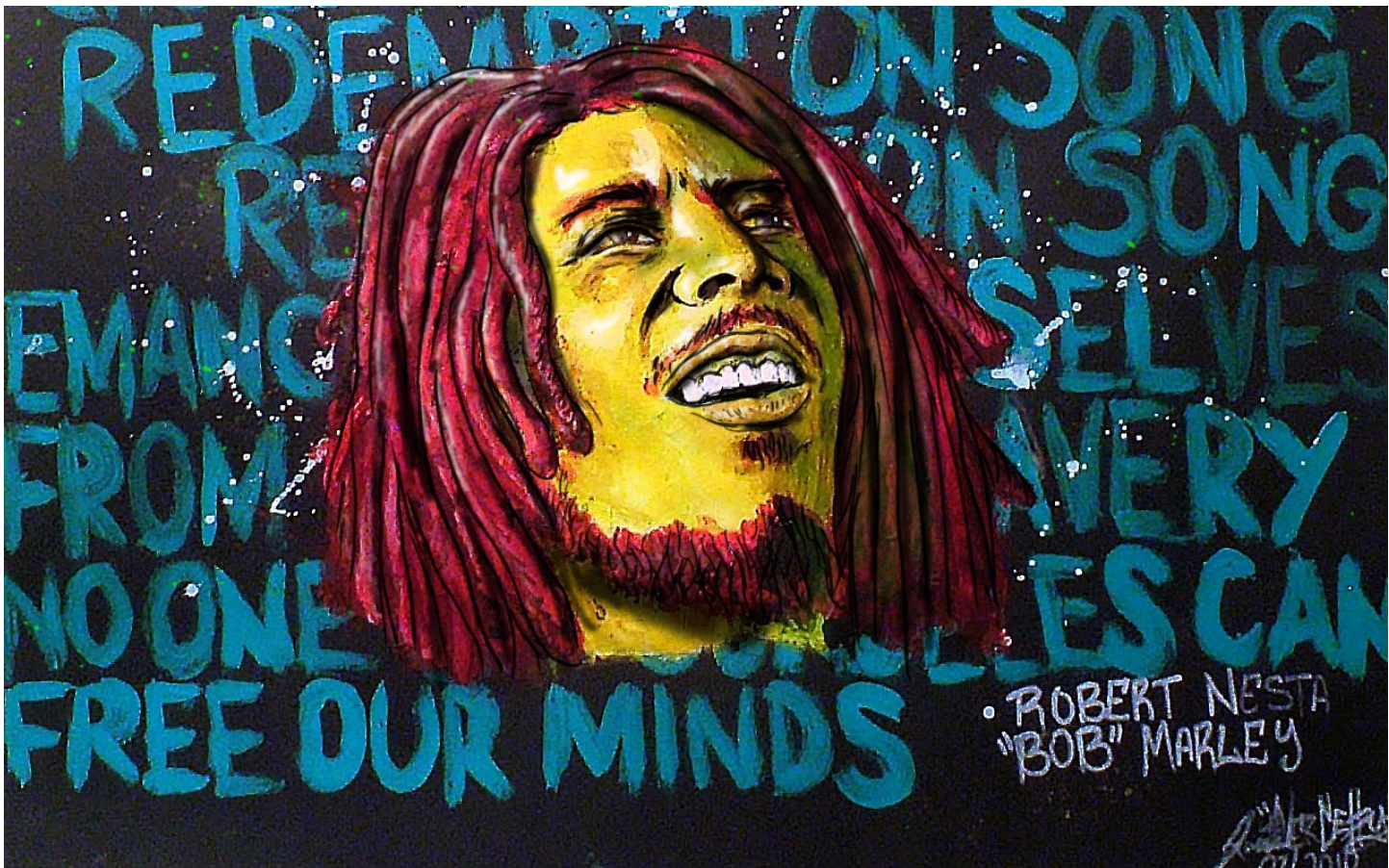


Fig. 2: Quentin Vercetty. (2010). Redemption Song.

work was able to draw out how the reggae icon was able to take on some elements of reparations in his music. In my analysis, four main themes were propositioned:

emancipation, a non-linear two-way process that includes redemption (internal decolonization) and self-actualization (awareness inspired by the embracement of Rastafari livity that is grounded on Rastafari principles);

chant down Babylon, the musical call that argues for destroying the global racial capitalist system;

repatriation, a central tenet in the theory of Rastafari livity that emphasizes the “return” to Africa (Ethiopia) which can occur in three states—physically, mentally, and spiritually, as a way to get to “Jah Kingdom”—“Zion;” and

the Promised land (Zion)—the notion of access and ownership of land that comes with the ideations of reparations. Ownership of property is not the main element of the promised land, but

rather the idea of sovereignty, away from “Babylon” as Marcus Garvey attempted to establish on the African continent.

My examination of Marley’s music is an example of how the arts can be used as a possible tool to politicize and mobilize Caribbean civil society on the reparations conversation, similar to Marley’s usage of reggae to push Rastafari philosophies.



References

- Bogues, A. (2012). And what about the human?: Freedom, human emancipation, and the radical imagination. *Boundary 2*, vol. 39(3), 29–46.
- Cooper, C. (1995). Chanting down Babylon: Bob Marley's song as literary text. *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. Duke University Press, 117–134.
- Fanon, F. (1965). *A dying colonialism*. Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Toward the African Revolution*. Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white mask*. Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Mask*. Grove Press.
- Garvey, M. (1986). *Message to the People: The Course of African Philosophy* (Edited by Tony Martin). The Majority Press.
- Hutton, C. (2010). The power of philosophy in Bob Marley's music. *Jamaica Journal*, vol. 33(1–2), pp. 30–39.
- Marley, B. (1979). *Babylon System* [Song]. On *Survival* [Album]. Island / Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1973). *Burnin'* [Album]. Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1983). *Confrontation* [Album]. Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1977). *Exodus* [Album]. Island Records.
- Marley, B. (1977). *Exodus* [Song]. On *Exodus* [Album]. Island / Universal Distribution.
- Marley, B. (1977). *Jamming* [Song]. On *Exodus* [Album]. Island / Universal Distribution.
- Marley, B. (1978). *Kaya* [Album]. Tuff Gong / PolyGram.
- Marley, B. (1974). *Natty Dread* [Album]. Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1973). *Rastaman Chant* [Song]. On *Burnin'* [Album]. Tuff Gong / PolyGram.
- Marley, B. (1976). *Rastaman Vibration* [Album]. PolyGram / Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1980). *Redemption Song*. [Song]. On *Uprising* [Album]. Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1979). *Survival* [Album]. Island / Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1980). *Uprising* [Album]. Tuff Gong.
- Marley, B. (1980). *Zion Train*. [Song]. On *Uprising* [Album]. Tuff Gong.
- Matthews, G. (2017). *The Caribbean Reparations Movement and the British Slavery Apologies: An Appraisal*. University of the West Indies Press, 51(1), 80–104
- Mutabaruka. (2021, May 12). *Mutabaruka speaks about white rastas and the rastafari movement* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnwIN8V-VeRQ>
- Nettleford, R. (2009). *Decolonizing the spirit: the work of the creative imagination*. UNESCO, vol. 61(4), pp. 35–40.
- Ogunleye, T. (1998). *Dr. Martin Robison Delany, 19th-century africana womanists: reflections on his avant-garde politics concerning gender, colorism, and nation building*. *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 28(5), pp. 628–649.
- Tafari, S. L. (2008). *Rastafari: From Religion to Social Theory*. In *Rastafari* (pp. 25–37). Caribbean Quarterly.
- Vercetty, Q. (2010). *Redemption Song* [digital art]. Toronto, Canada.
- Vercetty, Q (2021). *Rastafari Redemption* [digital

