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Rastafarians in Post-Independence Caribbean Poetry in English (the 1960s and the 1970s): from Pariahs to Cultural Creators

Eric Doumerc

- 1 The 1960s in the English-speaking Caribbean were a troubled period and a time of change. Independence (in 1962 for Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, and in 1966 for Barbados and Guyana) raised people's expectations and meant that a new cultural climate set in. The American Black Power and Civil Rights Movements came to have a certain influence on mentalities, and the Rastafarian movement, a millenarian and messianic movement which first developed in the 1930s, began to exert a major influence on popular culture and particularly on popular music. The 1960s were also characterised by a certain disillusionment with the benefits of independence and with a rediscovery of the African or Afro-Caribbean dimension of Caribbean culture. In the 1960s, Rastafarians began to appear in poems by West Indian poets about social issues, the fragmentation of Caribbean societies and the search for "roots". Rastafarianism in these poems seemed to function as a symbol of the absurdity of man's condition in the Caribbean and Rastas often appear as outcasts or pariahs who long to escape from Babylon. This view of Rastafarianism was shared by a number of poets who sympathised with the Rastas but who remained detached observers and gave an account of Rastafarianism from the outside. Other poets who were closer to Rastafarianism chose to focus on the role of the Rasta as a cultural agent, the bearer of a new Caribbean culture, a creole culture.
- 2 The Rastafarians, with their striking hairstyle, Bible-inspired code language and general detachment from "Babylon", appealed to West Indian writers, who were trying to find their own voice at the time. These writers saw a similarity between the Rastas' status as pariahs and the writer's lone search for a West Indian aesthetics. As the critic Laurence A. Breiner wrote, the most common scene in many poems about Rastafarians

is the lone Rastafarian ghetto-dweller smoking his ganja to escape from reality while he waits for the arrival of Marcus Garvey's ship to come and take him back to Ethiopia, his Promised Land (Breiner 218). In some of these poems, the Rastafarian is an outsider, an outcast, a pariah and the emphasis is laid on his status as an exile in his adopted homeland.

- 3 In a number of poems by Anthony Mc Neill, Mervyn Morris and Kendell Hippolyte, Rastafarians are depicted as alienated exiles who take refuge in fantasies and in herb-smoking while the odds are clearly against them. The template for this type of poem may well have been Orlando Patterson's *Children of Sisyphus*, a 1964 novel which portrayed the Rastas as trapped in an absurd ideology of repatriation to a homeland they never knew. In the novel the Rastas appear as pariahs who are totally cut off from the rest of society and wait for Marcus Garvey's ship to come and take them back to Africa, a "pipe dream" which is denounced as absurd.
- 4 In these poems, the Rastas appear as losers, as the underdogs who desperately battle against evil and materialistic forces. Anthony Mc Neill's "Straight Seeking" portrays the Rastas as deluded by their fantasies of repatriation, waiting for Marcus Garvey's Black Star Liners to dock in Kingston harbour to take them back to Africa. This is denounced as a "pipe dream" and the Rastas' attitude is clearly associated with escapism and the "spliff":

Many believe one day the ship
will drop anchor at Freeport
but now it's enough to praise
high on the s'liff. The smoke-
blackened city wounds instant
divines to enter their pipes
like dreams. (Anthony Mc Neill, in Brown and McDonald 142)

- 5 The pun on "pipedreams" is particularly effective and seems to suggest that the Rastas are deluding themselves and are "dreamers". The reference to marijuana, used as a herb for sacramental purposes, is also denounced as a form of escapism. But the tone of the poem is not wholly negative and could be said to be rather sympathetic to the Rastas as the "tenements" and "blackened cities" where the Rastas live are the roots of such fantasies. Nevertheless the rest of the poem makes it clear that the poet/persona is not "one of them" and distances himself from the Rastas as his ship is "compassed by reason" and is a kind of fragile equilibrium between "Africa" and "heaven". This poem is ambivalent about the Rastas' ideals and sympathises with them while making it clear that the poet is an outsider.
- 6 At the time Rastafarianism was emerging as a powerful cultural force in the music industry. The origins of Rastafarianism¹ seem to be associated with a prophecy made in 1927 by Marcus Garvey according to which a black king would be crowned in the east: "Look to the east for the crowning of a black king. He shall be the Redeemer" (Barrett 81). In 1930 Ras Tafari, a young Ethiopian prince, was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia and took the name "Haile Selassie", which means "Power of the Trinity" in ancient Ethiopian. The new Emperor also took the following Christian titles: "King of Kings, Lords of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah" as Ethiopia was a Christian country. In Jamaica, a number of Garveyite preachers had interpreted Selassie's coronation as the fulfilment of Marcus Garvey's prophecy and started preaching about the coming of a black king who would be the Redeemer. These preachers included Leonard Percival Howell and Nathaniel Hibbert (Barrett 81-82).

- 7 In the 1940s, Howell and his followers moved into a vast compound named Pinnacle and started a kind of cultural revolution in Jamaica. Indeed, the Howellites lived communally, smoked marijuana, worshipped their black god and praised all things African. They became known as “Rastafarians” or “dreadlocks” on account of their distinctive hairstyle that struck terror into Jamaicans’ hearts (Barrett 86-89). The Rastas did not pay any taxes and many squatted on government land. They gradually became real figures of fear or outcasts, and most Jamaicans despised them or were frightened of them, warning their children against the Rastaman who would come and take them away if they misbehaved.
- 8 The Jamaican authorities raided Pinnacle several times, and in 1954, after a particularly violent raid, most Rastas left Pinnacle and moved to the West Kingston slums or to other parts of the country. By the late 1950s, many Rastas lived in West Kingston and clashes with the police were becoming more and more frequent. With the coming of independence, the Jamaican authorities decided to find out who the Rastafarians really were and commissioned a report by three academics from the then University College of the West Indies. By the early 1960s, many Rastas lived in West Kingston and clashes with the police were becoming more and more frequent. One such clash, the Coral Gardens incident, deeply shocked the nation and most Jamaicans grew aware of the existence of the sect at that time. Indeed, in 1963, a group of Rastas killed a petrol station attendant, near Montego Bay, and then looted a motel. To many Jamaicans, Rastafarianism became synonymous with violence, and the government continued to adopt a repressive attitude (for instance jailing the Rastas and cutting off their dreadlocks).
- 9 Nevertheless, two important developments were to give the Rastafarians an unprecedented degree of legitimacy: Haile Selassie’s visit to Jamaica and the growing popularity of the Rastafarian faith and lifestyle with Jamaica’s poor, and reggae singers. In April 1966, Haile Selassie himself paid a state visit to Jamaica and was welcomed by a crowd of about 100,000 Rastafarians, who invaded the tarmac of the airport. Selassie’s visit to Jamaica did much to make many people aware of the popularity of this movement (Barrett 158-160). This new legitimacy in turn led many musicians and singers to adopt the Rastafarian faith and in the late 1960s artists like the Abyssinians, Burning Spear, and the Wailers (Bunny Livingstone, Bob Marley, and Peter Tosh) all became spokespersons for the movement, spreading its tenets in their songs.
- 10 The new legitimacy bestowed upon the Rastas by Selassie’s visit gave them a special status and some poets saw them as icons of the new nation searching for its identity. This seems to be the case for Tony McNeill’s “Saint Ras”. In this poem, the main Rastafarian character is literally lost in Babylon’s concrete jungle and cannot even cross the street:
- Every stance seemed crooked. He had
not learned to fall in with the straight
queued, capitalistic, for work.
He was uneasy in traffic. (Anthony Mc Neill, in Burnett 307)
- 11 Right from the start, the Rastafarian character is presented as a misfit, as a pariah who cannot “go with the flow” and fit in. This deeply allegorical poem pits the Rastas’ spiritualism against the materialism of Babylon, but in the end the Rasta’s condition is to be an exile: he is an in-betweenner.

- 12 The traffic lights which fail to take the exiled Rasta to the “island of Ras” are a metaphor for the codes of modern society that Rastafarians cannot crack. At the end of the poem, “light and doubt” are the two poles which symbolise the Rasta's condition: “[he] returns to harsh temporal streets/whose uncertain crossings reflect/his true country. Both doubt and light”. So exile is the Rasta's country. This condition may also be said to have reflected the plight of the West Indian writer who had to come to terms with his role in society and his search for an authentic voice.
- 13 In other poems, the Rastafarians seem to represent the absurdity of man's condition and are shown waiting, endlessly waiting for deliverance. They are depicted as idealists whose battle against Babylon is a losing battle. This theme appears in Tony Mc Neill's “Ode to Brother Joe”, a poem about the kind of harassment the Rastas were subjected to in the 1950s and 1960s. Brother Joe is arrested by the police because he was caught smoking marijuana and then was sent to jail. The poet is clearly on the side of the Rastas as he points out that what is a criminal offence for the police is a religious act for the Rastas:
- When he lights up a s'liff
you can't stop him
and the door to God, usually shut
gives in a rainbow gust. (McNeill, in Dawes *Wheel* 136)
- 14 The poet also insists on the community spirit which characterises the Rastafarian movement. But “Hail / Selassie is far away / and couldn't care less” and the end of the poem emphasises Babylon's superiority as the “door” of the prison remains “shut” and the Rastas's dreams are powerless:
- Meantime, in the musty cell
Joe invokes, almost from habit
the magic words:
Hail Selassie I
Jah Rastafari
But the door is real and remains shut. (Mc Neill, in Dawes *Wheel* 137)
- 15 The theme of the absurdity of the Rastas' condition is also present in Mervyn Morris's “Rasta Reggae” and in Kendell Hyppolite's “Zoo Story – Ja. '76”. Morris's “Rasta Reggae” cleverly begins as a poem about a reggae band whose message is typically about liberation and the trauma of slavery:
- out of that pain
that bondage
heavy heavy sounds. (Mervyn Morris, in Dawes *Wheel* 146)
- 16 Then, we are told that music functions as a solace for the Rastas and a “joyful horn” evokes the freedom that came after slavery. The poem also contains allusions to the religious matrix out of which reggae and Rastafarianism emerged (“let my people go”), but in the end, it turns out that the freedom longed for by the Rastas is purely psychological or spiritual as they will go home to “Ethiopia/in the mind”. The last line of the poem, “in the mind”, leads the reader to read the poem again and to reinterpret it in a different way. The poem seems to imply that music and mythologising enable the Rastas to escape from the harsh reality of oppression, but this freedom is purely theoretical. The last line, “in the mind”, is placed at a strategic place and is given added weight by being isolated from the rest of the poem. Take these words out and the poem would have a totally different impact.

- 17 A similar theme is treated in Kendell Hippolyte's "Zoo Story – Ja. '76", which is based on a true story: a Rastafarian jumped into the lions' cage in Kingston Zoo and he was devoured by the lions. This news item was turned by the poet into a poem on the Rastas' desperation and absurd search for freedom. The Rastafarian character in the poem has apparently lost faith and the dire living conditions he has to live under have taken their tolls:

spliff used to take him dere
before -
but wha'?
Spliff turn a white bone in him hand
rainbow faith bleach down
city dry him roots to straw. (Kendell Hippolyte, in Brown, Morris and Rohler 51).

- 18 The fire and drought imagery deployed in this passage enacts the Rastafarian character's despair, and consequently he comes to see the lions in the zoo as embodiments of his condition. Of course, in Rastafarian mythology, the lion symbolises Africa and the lost homeland, and the Rastafarian's dreadlocks are often said to evoke a lion's mane. So the Rastafarian in the poem confuses mythology and reality, and jumps into the lions' cage to gain his freedom. In this poem, the zoo seems to function as a metonym for Jamaican society which keeps the Rastas captive. So the Rasta in the poem senses an affinity with the captive lion and finds his freedom in death, which shows the absurdity of the Rasta's condition and could be seen as an indictment of Jamaican society. Indeed, a few years after independence, Caribbean societies seemed unable to provide their citizens with a sense of purpose and a shared identity. In the late 1960s, the English-speaking Caribbean was rocked by a series of demonstrations and riots which were partly inspired by the American Black Power movement, the students' anti-war demonstrations in the USA and the riots in Paris in May 1968. This wave of discontent was also the product of the disappointment felt by many West Indians in the immediate post-Independence period. Indeed it was felt that Independence had not resulted in any visible improvement in West Indians' daily lives and that the West Indies were still colonial at heart. The historian, poet and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite wrote that the West Indies were going through a period of "post-Independence depression" (Brathwaite 5-9). One key issue was the education system which was still based on the study of European or American classics. In 1968, the Rodney riots in Jamaica pitted the unemployed, the "youths" and some academics at the University of the West Indies against the government. 1970 saw the occupation of the Creative Arts Centre on the Mona campus, and the "February Revolution" in Trinidad led by the National Joint Action Committee.
- 19 But some poets saw the Rastafarians in a more positive light and identified them as the bearers of a new culture, a truly original creole culture. This development seems to be linked with the search for a new voice, a new aesthetics. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the key issue debated by West Indian academics, intellectuals and writers was: "Is there a real West Indian literature? If not, what direction would that new literature take?". Another key issue was that the kind of aesthetics a West Indian literature could be built on. An early Caribbean Artists Movement meeting in 1967 in London was convened around the theme "Is there a West Indian aesthetic?" (Walmsley 51). In fact the Caribbean Artists Movement had been founded in London in late 1967 or early 1968 and had begun to debate these issues. The writers involved in the movement were Edward Kamau Brathwaite himself, Andrew Salkey, Gordon Rohler, Wilson Harris and

Orlando Patterson. Another important question was that of the West Indian writer and of that function. What function could a writer have in a post-colonial setting where most people looked to Europe for everything that was of value and where everything local was downgraded and rejected? Moreover, many West Indian writers had felt that the writer had no place in the West Indies as there simply was no reading public in such a philistine and materialistic society. V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming and Michael Anthony had all left the West Indies earlier on to launch their career in Britain. Derek Walcott was one of the few West Indian artists who remained in the West Indies and chose to further his career at home.

- 20 In 1971, there was an important conference at the University of the West Indies where West Indian writers met their audience for the first time. Various positions were taken. George Lamming thought that the West Indian writer could not write in the West Indies. Edward Kamau Brathwaite thought that the function of the West Indian writer was to reach out to the people and to produce a type of poetry which would be based on their culture and traditions. Brathwaite saw the writer as an integral part of the nation's culture and as the one who would reveal to the people the value of its culture (Walmsley 260-261). Thus, Brathwaite defended the idea of a West Indian aesthetic based on popular traditions and orality.
- 21 This movement in favour of a Caribbean aesthetic was led by Brathwaite but was kept alive by critics like Gordon Rohler who published a series of articles on the language of Calypso. Rohler analysed the lyrics of the Mighty Sparrow's songs and tried to prove that these lyrics had in fact literary qualities and were oral poems. Marina Maxwell started a folk experiment called "Yard Theatre" in Jamaica and this form of popular or "street" theatre reflected the mood of the times which was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, Black Power, and by the growing popularity of the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica.
- 22 These experiments soon triggered a debate about the quality of the new poetry produced by these artists. Things came to a head in 1970 with the publication of an edition of *Savacou* (initially a journal associated with the Caribbean Artists Movement). This issue of *Savacou* contained a number of pieces by Rastafarian poets like Ras Dizzy and Bongo Jerry which were unlike anything previously published. The Trinidadian poet and critic Eric Roach published an article in the *Trinidad Guardian* in which he was very critical of these poems. Roach stressed "craft" and the "civilising" influence of European literature and culture: "One must erect one's own bungalow by the sea out of the full knowledge of the architecture of the English places and cottages". Roach dismissed the new poems as "Air on a nigger string" and said that reading these poems reminded him of listening to a "mad Shango drummer" (Walmsley 263-265). Gordon Rohler defended the new poetry in an article which took Roach to task for failing to replace these pieces in their proper cultural context (popular music, Rastafarianism) and wrote that West Indian critics would have to listen to the way West Indian people talk and to learn more about their culture before they can assess their poetry. Leavis's great tradition would be of little help. This debate became gradually known as the "Walcott/Brathwaite debate". In her 1970 article on that debate, Patricia Ismond quoted Edward Lucie-Smith as saying: "We must choose between Walcott and Brathwaite" (Ismond 54-70).
- 23 In 1967 Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage* was published. This book of poems was the first part of a trilogy entitled *The Arrivants* and which was published in 1973.

The other two installments of the trilogy were entitled *Masks* and *Islands*. *The Arrivants* can be seen as an epic account of black people's voyage from Africa to the Caribbean, of their uprooting from the land of their fathers and of their subsequent adaptation to a new world. *The Arrivants* can be viewed as an epic inasmuch as it is not concerned with the poet's own musings or neurosis, but with a people's predicament.

- 24 Brathwaite's work revolutionised Caribbean poetry by laying the emphasis on orality, performance and popular traditions both in Africa and in the West Indies. Brathwaite had lived in Ghana for a number of years and when coming back home had come to see the Caribbean as a continuation of African cultures. In his poems, he used repetition, snatches of famous Caribbean songs, proverbs, references to jazz, the Rastafarian movement, etc. Brathwaite also gave several readings of his poetry both in London and in the West Indies and that was a revelation for many people. His insistence on the need for a new poetry rooted in the West Indian experience led him to focus on the Rastafarians.

- 25 Brathwaite's "Wings of a Dove" (named after Psalm 55 and the famous West Indian folk song of the same name) appeared in 1967 in *Rights of Passage* and embodied that search for a new aesthetics. In this poem Brathwaite portrays the Rastafarian as a frightening ghetto dweller who lives in a shanty town and shares his hut with "mice":

Brother Man the Rasta
man, beard full of lichens
brain full of lice
watched the mice
come up through the floor-
boards of his down-
town, shanty-town kitchen
and smiled. Blessed are the poor
in health, he mumbled
that they should inherit this
wealth. Blessed are the meek
hearted, he grumbled
for theirs is this stealth. (Brathwaite, www.courses.edu/Brathwaite)

- 26 The "beard full of lichens/brain full of lice", with their binary rhythm, insist on the negative stereotypes circulating about Rastas at the time. Brathwaite also alludes to the Rastas' knowledge of the Bible and uses it ironically to point out their plight. The Rastafarians' reinterpretation of the Bible is constantly alluded to together with their African drum patterns, possibly referring to the creole or syncretic nature of the Rastafarian cult. The mice in the Rasta's hovel are a symbol of the Rastafarians' status in Jamaican society (unwanted outcasts, pests) and also of the Rastas' invisibility.
- 27 In this type of poem about Rastafarians, the Rastas' esoteric code language², made up of I-words and new coinages, is emphasised. The Rastafarians devised a new language to suit their own world view and ideology. The main characteristics of this new language are the predominance of "I-Words" and the constant coining of new words tailored to achieve a greater adequacy between signifier and signified.
- 28 The predominance of "I-words" in the Rastafarian code language is a consequence of the Rastafarians' desire to be in communion with their god, that is Haile Selassie. It must be said that the Rastafarians pronounce the Roman numeral "I" in "Haile Selassie I" as if it was the first person personal pronoun. Thus an identity is established between the person who speaks and his Creator. That identity provides the basis for countless

new phrases that pepper the Rastafarian code language such as “I-ses” (=praises), “I-tal” (=vital), “I-rie” (=free), and “I-ssembly” (= assembly). Other phrases common in Rastafarian talk are “Yes-I” (=yes indeed) and “Jah-I” (= Myself and Jah).

- 29 The words tailored to achieve a greater adequacy between signifier and signified are words whose first or second syllable has been replaced by a more “appropriate” one. This linguistic manipulation is based both on sound and meaning. For instance, the word “oppressor” is said to fail to convey the negative connotations of its meaning because of the positive associations of the syllable “op”. Thus its opposite, “down”, is substituted and the end product is “downpressor”.
- 30 Another example is the word “everlasting”, whose third syllable is burdened with the negative connotations of the word “last”. Thus the verb “to live” will replace “last”, and the new coinage is “everliving”. Here are a few examples of the Rastafarians’ search for a less arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified: “deity – livity”, “dialect – livalek”, “destroy – downstroy”, “understand – overstand”. The Rastafarian’s “dread talk” is a key element in Brathwaite’s “Wings of a Dove”:

“And I
Rastafar-I
in Babylon’s boom
town, crazed by the moon
and the peace of this chalice, I
prophet and singer, scourge
of the gutter” (Brathwaite www.courses.edu)

- 31 In the passage quoted above, the repetition of the diphthong [ai] together with the use of a specifically Rastafarian vocabulary (“Babylon”, “chalice”) create a vivid portrait of a Rasta living on the streets. The Rastafarian ghetto-dweller appears as a slightly menacing figure (“crazed by the moon”) ready to take his revenge on Babylon (“scourge”). The Rastafarian is also a “prophet”, which refers to the Rastas’ appropriation of the Bible. The Rastas’ constant reference to the Bible is also alluded to.
- 32 This characteristic of the Rastas’ code language is also emphasised in Bongo Jerry’s “Mabrak” which resorts to Rastafarian rhetoric to create a vivid portrait of a Rastafarian. In this poem capital letters, verticality, fragmentation, a semi-phonetic spelling and the Rastas’ own language create the voice of a persona who is a pariah, an outsider. The idea is to give a voice to the exiled Rastafarian and to give the Rastas’ language access to the world of poetry. The Rastas’ search for a language which would reflect their own world view is emphasised in this poem:

Cramp all double meaning
an’ all that hiding behind language bar
for that crossword speaking
when expressing feeling
is just English language contribution to increase confusion in
Babel-land tower (Bongo Jerry, in Burnett 70)

- 33 As the passage quoted above suggests, the spacing of words on the printed page and the use of accumulation are meant to create an effect of “defamiliarisation” as the reader is shocked into acknowledging a new “reality” or a new language. Defamiliarisation is also illustrated by the phonetic spelling in “mostofthestraighteningisinthetongue” which evokes a continuous flow of words. The poem also refers to the old biblical idea of language as power. In oral cultures language is said to have magical powers and to

create a new reality (Ong 32). For the Rastafarians “wordsound have power” is more than a popular catchphrase and language is a powerful weapon:

Every tongue
confess
Every language
express
W
O
R
D
W
O
R
K
S

(Bongo Jerry, in Burnett 69-70)

- 34 The Rastafarians' own language can also be heard in many of the late Michael Smith's poems in which the main persona is a lone Rasta, or a Rasta sympathiser living on his own and cut off from society. Poems by Smith like “I and I Alone” are monologues. Indeed the personae of many Smith poems use this Rastafarian way of speaking, with its reliance on the Roman numeral/personal pronoun “I”. The poem entitled “I an I alone” is a case in point:

I an I alone
ah trod tru creation
Babylon on I right
Babylon on I left
Babylon in front of I
and Babylon behine I
an I an I alone inna de middle
like a Goliath with a sling shot (Michael Smith, in Mordecai 228)

- 35 The phrase “I and I” refers to a Rastafarian and his “brethren” but could also be paraphrased as “I and God” as the personal pronoun “I” is sometimes read as the Roman numeral “I” which in this particular case would send us back to Haile Selassie I, whom the Rastafarians consider as God.
- 36 The Rastafarians also use “I” for “my”, that is the personal pronoun subject for the possessive adjective. In this excerpt the Rastafarian persona is a lone “I” in the middle of a crowd. The poem relies on a contrast between the Rasta's language and the patois or creole to be found further down: “me calaloo”, “Jesus, me blessed Saviour”. The whole poem is based on a contrast between the lone “dread” and the rest of society and the market is of course a metonym for Jamaican society. The reappropriation of the Bible is very visible in the words “like a Goliath with a sling shot”.
- 37 Generally these poems are written by poets who are very close to the Rastafarian movement, though not Rastafarians themselves and tend to foreground language and diction. They are monologues in which the idea is to create an authentic-sounding voice which can give the reader or listener access to a particular and complex aspect of West Indian culture.
- 38 The complexity of Caribbean culture appears in a poem by Opal Palmer's “Ethiopia under a Jamaican Mango Tree”. In Opal Palmer Adisa's “Ethiopia Unda a Jamaican Mango Tree”, the Rastafarian appears as a peaceful loner trying to avoid any resort to violence although Babylon refuses to give him a job because “him is dreadlocks”. The

mango tree has a metonymic function and symbolises the return to a mythical Africa. In this poem, which is divided into three sections, one in Creole, the second in Standard English, and the third in Creole again we get to hear the Rasta's own voice with its I-words and new coinings like "deadas" for "dead flesh" or "meat":

'Me nah wuk fi
nuh babylon. Babylon will
meet fire. I man is
son of Jah. I man is Jah.
I man a guh satter and
meditate and plough de land
and I man a guh eat fresh
vegetable, no deadas. I man
a guh make disyah mango tree
I temple. I man a guh hook
yah till Jah come fi I'. (Opal Palmer Adise, in Dawes *Wheel* 150)

- 39 In this passage, the Rastafarian code language is deployed to full effect with the use of I-words and the resort to "I" as a possessive adjective ("I temple"). The use of Rastafarian new coinages like "deadas" (= dead meat) and 'to satter' (= to sit down) is also designed to create a voice portrait of a Rasta, but we also get to hear the poet's own voice. The Rasta is not the main persona here and the second section gives us the persona's point of view, which is sympathetic to the Rastas' dream of escape from Babylon. The Rastas' escapism is here presented as an alternative to violence and confrontation, and the final section in Creole makes it clear that in the end the Rastas are the ones who win. In this poem, the persona is a detached observer who is not a Rasta but who sympathises with their plight.
- 40 The poem is based on a well-known West Indian practice which is known as code-switching, that is the switch from Standard English to Creole or vice-versa, sometimes in the middle of a sentence. Code-switching was first identified as a characteristic of West Indian culture by the linguist David De Camp, who developed the concept of a language continuum (De Camp 349-370), but literary critics soon used that concept to analyse West Indian poetry:" Unlike most of his European counterparts, the West Indian who speaks "BBC" English is probably also master of a local vernacular, and can draw on any point of the language range between market dialect and courtroom English (Burnett XXV). In Palmer's poem, there are at least three different versions of English which are used: Standard English, Rasta talk/ dread talk, and Jamaican Creole or "patois" as it is called in Jamaica. In this poem the Rasta wins in the end because he refuses to resort to violence and his mythology is presented as a positive force for change, not as escapism. His ganja-induced reverie led him to accept his fate in Jamaica and the title of the poem alludes to the complexity of West Indian culture. That complexity is enacted by the very structure of the poem, with the three sections succeeding each other and introducing the reader to various language registers.
- 41 The Rastas gradually provided West Indian poets with new images, new motifs and this is visible in Dennis Scott's "Squatter's Rites". This poem features the character of an "old Ras" who had led a pastoral life in the hills and had planted "peas, corn and potatoes", thus maintaining his dignity by living apart from society:

Peas, corn, potatoes; he had
planted himself
king of a drowsy hill; no one
cared how he came to

such green dignity
 scratching his majesty
 among the placid chickens. (Dennis Scott, in Mordecai 205)

- 42 The old farmer is said to have the same kind of dignity as the Emperor of Ethiopia and to lead a simple, frugal life in the hills. “King of a drowsy hill”, apart from the reference to Selassie's royal lineage, may also refer to the sturdy independence traditionally maintained by Jamaican hill farmers. But we learn that after the old farmer's “deposition”, his death, his farmhouse and the hen coops fell into disrepair and his Rastafarian way of life went with him (“The parliament of dreams dissolved”). The second stanza of the poem is reminiscent of Derek Walcott's “Ruins of a Great House” (Walcott 19-21), with “senatorial lizards” taking over the old man's “chair” and “spiders” locking the door. But all is not lost and a line of continuity exists between the old Ras and the new reggae subculture, embodied by the old man's son who “blows reggae” in town.
- 43 The poem is a kind of elegy written to the dying peasant culture of Jamaica which is here represented by the lone Rastafarian farmer. The Rastafarian here is a kind of pastoralist, a “mystic farmer” in touch with Nature and associated with a purely rural background. The main contrast in the poem is between the old Rasta and his son who left the countryside, went to town, played in a reggae band, and thus became divorced from the land. But the son is redeemed in the end and composes a reggae-jazz number for his father, thus becoming reunited with the land. The old Rasta farmer's plight is said to reflect that of the late Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, who was crowned in 1930 and then deposed in 1975: “after his deposition / the uncivil wind / snarled anarchy through that small kingdom” and “like a scepter.” The references to Selassie's reign and to his downfall are meant to draw a parallel between the humble farmer's life in the Jamaican hills and the Emperor's life in Ethiopia, with the inference that the old farmer tried to maintain his “dignity” in dire circumstances. Dennis Scott's poem seems to present Rastafarianism as a continuation of Jamaican peasant culture, as a cultural movement which revitalised Jamaican society in the same way as Rastafarian culture provided Caribbean poetry with new images and new motifs.
- 44 Thus Rastafarians proved to be a pervasive influence on Caribbean poetry in English in the 1960s and 1970s and their sonorous diction, creole mythology and defiant stance became part of the Caribbean literary tradition. In the two decades which followed independence, they elicited various reactions from West Indian poets, from sympathetic portrayals of their way of life to recreations of their sonorous language and diction, to sceptic assessments of their beliefs. The Rastafarians became icons for a generation of poets and writers who were searching for a new voice, a new aesthetics, new symbols. The Rastafarian, with his “pipe dream” and his fantasies about a mythical Africa, may have become, like Derek Walcott's castaway, a Caribbean archetype about fashioning a new culture in the Caribbean out of the jetsam and flotsam of History³.

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NOTES

1. The following summary of the rise of the Rastafarian movement is heavily indebted to Leonard E. Barrett's *The Rastafarians: The Dreadlocks of Jamaica* (London: Heinemann, 1977).
 2. Velma Pollard's *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Kingston, Jamaica: Canoe Press, 1994) is a masterful introduction to the intricacies of the Rastafarians' distinctive language.
 3. Derek Walcott elaborated on these themes in poems like "The Castaway", "Crusoe's Journal" and "Crusoe's Island" which initially appeared in his 1965 collection *The Castaway*.
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ABSTRACTS

This article proposes to look at the way Rastafarians were portrayed in various ways by West Indian poets in the 1960s and 1970s. After paying attention to the historical and cultural context, the article focuses on three main strands in the portrayal of Rastafarians at the time. In a number of poems, Rastas emerged as pariahs and idealists who based their life on a fantasy. Other poets saw the Rastafarians as the symbols of the absurdity of man's condition, patiently waiting for some kind of deliverance. Lastly, another tradition in West Indian poetry in English tends to look at the Rastafarians as the bearers of a new, creole culture and the emphasis is laid on their contribution to Caribbean culture in terms of language and symbolism.

L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner plusieurs modes de représentation des Rastafariens dans la poésie antillaise anglophone des années 1960 et 1970. Après s'être attardé sur le contexte historique et culturel, il sera question de trois tendances générales dans la représentation des Rastafariens pendant cette période. Dans certains poèmes, les Rastas apparaissent comme des parias et des idéalistes qui ont fondé leur vie entière sur un rêve absurde. D'autres poètes ont vu chez les Rastas le symbole de l'absurdité de la vie de l'homme, qui attend une certaine délivrance avec patience. Enfin, il existe une autre tradition dans la poésie antillaise anglophone qui a tendance à considérer le Rasta comme le vecteur d'une nouvelle culture créole et donc on mettra l'accent sur l'apport culturel des Rastas, par exemple en ce qui concerne les codes linguistiques et symboliques.

INDEX

Mots-clés: absurde, Bible, créole, culture populaire, patois, esthétique, exil, langage, oralité, rastafarisme, reggae, tradition orale

Keywords: the absurd, aesthetic, the Bible, creole, exile, popular culture, orality, oral tradition, patois, Rastafarianism, reggae

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