What Softening

Adam Tyler Bishop

*University of Colorado at Boulder, adam.bishop@colorado.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/engl_gradetds

Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](https://scholar.colorado.edu/english_language_and_literature_commons), [Poetry Commons](https://scholar.colorado.edu/poetry_commons), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](https://scholar.colorado.edu/race_and_ethnicity_commons)

**Recommended Citation**


https://scholar.colorado.edu/engl_gradetds/57
What Softening

Adam Tyler Bishop
BA English, Creative Writing, California State University 2009

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Masters Degree of Fine Arts

Department of English
2014
This thesis entitled:
What Softening
written by Adam Bishop
has been approved for the Department of English

________________________
Ruth Ellen Kocher

________________________
Noah Eli Gordon

________________________
Paul Youngquist

Date_______________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Adam Bishop, MFA Department of English

What Softening

Thesis Directed by Professor Ruth Ellen Kocher

In a project with roots in love, family and home, What Softening examines the domestic space through a nontraditional masculinity which considers the home sacred in all its imperfections and grotesqueries; these poems seek to accept its messiness as harmony. They attempt to pluralize the “I” while fortifying its sense of individuality—“you” shapes “I” as much as “I” shapes “I.” “We” is inevitable in these poems, and it is the exploration of this inevitable that brings to surface tensions between domestic frustrations and solaces, that imminent mess. Home in these poems becomes unhomely, unsettled despite its visages of comfort and conclusion. Identifying itself within the folds of masculinity, the voice in these poems seeks to deconstruct what he views destructively normalized; He is a masculinity in revision, looking backward at his family history and forward to his own future with his domestic partner, all under the threat of illness and disease; He takes ownership of the domestic space but does not seek to dominate it. These poems honor the gaps and fissures of communication, what is lost by force or forgetfulness or omission, what is agreeably interrupted by the presence of a significant “other” at home.
# Table of Contents

My Beard  My Apron..................................................................................................................1

When We Take to the City
It Transforms Us  Our Place........................................................................................................7
My Future  Inside........................................................................................................................10
Out the Window  A Single Pane Cloud.....................................................................................12
The Birthday Room....................................................................................................................13
The VCR......................................................................................................................................14
I’ll Forget My Face and Yours......................................................................................................15
When I Cook Dinner  I Consume the Body.................................................................................18
Genetics of the Thing..................................................................................................................20
Your Mouth Opens  Clean as a Cat’s .........................................................................................25

These Grey Peaks  We Can See the Ocean
Air Up Here  Everything Flakes................................................................................................27
Open With a Longshot  Swoop Lake to Volkswagen...................................................................28
Warm Storm  I’ve Also Had the Joy.............................................................................................29
The Birthday Room....................................................................................................................31
Today the Post Was Early............................................................................................................32
You Make Vowels in Your Sleep.................................................................................................34
Stains aren’t Mine  This Red Corduroy.....................................................................................35
I Am Learning Peacefulness........................................................................................................36
Before We Think About Kids....................................................................................................38
In the Face of Impulse................................................................................................................39
The Birthday Room....................................................................................................................41
Should Our Communion Get Tired.............................................................................................42

As We Mark the Shore
I Am a Tiny Ant Caught in the Orange Light of Amber...........................................................44
Hole in the Hull  How’d I Get This Drill ?...................................................................................45
Of Us  A Dream in Leucadia, CA...............................................................................................46
The Birthday Room....................................................................................................................53
My Beaded Tongue.....................................................................................................................54
When I Do Dishes  I Drink the Blood.........................................................................................55
The Sea Sucks Obsessively...........................................................................................................60
Beyond This Sign  We’ve Got New Options................................................................................62
At My Best  You’re the Page Under My Pen.............................................................................63

In the Hills  We Will Be Sleeping
Unkingly  I Am the Great Light Borrower................................................................................65
You  Love.....................................................................................................................................67
The Birthday Room....................................................................................................................69
Look Love.................................................................................................................................70
Shapes of Our Satellite..............................................................................................................72
The Birthday Room....................................................................................................................75
What Softenings What Softenings.............................................................................................76
Here is the Church Here is the Steeple.......................................................................................78
Before Sunset Let’s Take a Walk..................................................................................................79
Bringing the Drywall Down.........................................................................................................80
In my life the furniture eats me

- W. C. Williams, *Spring and All*
My Beard My Apron

The American Modernist manifestos
and the poetry they inspired illustrate how
Rastafari in both their day-to-day speech and reggae,
the principal vehicle of Rastafarian
cultural reproduction, employ

what the Modernists desire in poetry.
What the Rastafarians consider
a living unity of signifier and signified,
Rasta Speech, these Modern poets exalt
as what Ezra Pound would call

“charged” or “energized” poetry.
What divides these camps, Rasta Speech
and Modern poetry, what inspires their
similarly charged languages can be informed
the world’s history of Colonialism—For the
Rastas who are descendant of the Maroon

communities in Jamaica.2 Rasta Speech is a
means of self-identification and preservation, community,
and resistance; Alternately, the American
Modernists who are on the winning side of
colonialism, have the freedom to choose where
and when to employ their poetics. They
have the privilege to save their modern

language for the page, the Rastas do not.
My Positioning: I’m Not From Around Here

I have to confess outright that I am an on-again/off-again skeptic of the academy. That is,
I don’t immediately trust the Academic in his or her motive to research within the
humanities—particularly when the Academic is not directly a part of or connected to the region of their study. For instance, me and Jamaica. Certainly the work will be documented and exist for future academics to reflect upon, to draw conclusions about our time and its programming, however, the capitalistic institution within the academy and, at a bureaucratic level, the self-promotion within some intelligencia knells in my conscience and bears my misgivings. I want to be clear, this paper is in pursuit of an academic end but my hope is that I can maintain a transparency in that the paper is rooted in absolute sincerity. And I might make mistakes, but this project is by no means finished. I was born in 1985 and raised on the coast of Southern California where reggae music was a key sound in our culture’s soundtrack. Granted the tidal wave of reggae washed across the world well over a decade before I came around, in San Diego, the music’s prevalence is vital to my personal mixtape from adolescence into adulthood. Bob Marley’s greatest hits, Legends, score my earliest memories of reggae’s shuffling tempo, up-stroke guitars, and uplifting melodies—car rides, beach days, family vacations and social gatherings alike. Bob Marley’s influence is undeniable; his name and spirit permeates the world’s perceptions of reggae, so I don’t feel pressured to carry this dialogue with any focus on Marley. Rather, I am interested in other Rasta artists who use Rasta Speech in their music to not only communicate their culture, but to reinforce it. In middle school, I was introduced to South African artist, Lucky Dube (1964 – 2007), and former Wailer, Peter Tosh (1944 – 1987), on the way to water polo tournaments. My coach played his CDs for us on the commute from San Diego to wherever the tournament was held. He was also the man who introduced me to ideas and practices of Rastafari. Looking back, I don’t believe he was a follower of Rastafari. I think he was at the least a product of reggae’s remarkable entrance upon world-wide pop culture in the 1970s. Once I entered high school, I began seeking reggae on my own. I was growing into the world, becoming more aware as the youth will do, and reggae began to speak to me in ways other genres did not—peaceful lyrics and melodies, celebrative and alive, the love and sincerity. I could hear these things not only reggae’s artists but in its followers too. More and more the metamorphic capabilities of reggae confirmed within me.
Now at 28 years old, nearly every Sunday morning for the past ten years I have listened to reggae for a couple of hours at least, putting into motion a day of mindfulness and respect toward self and others. On Sundays I take care in relaxation and labor, family and strangers, wilderness and domestication. Perhaps it’s an echoing spirituality I carry from my adolescence in church, but this music seems to meet that essence and uplift it. As Alton Ellis asserts, “I got the Rasta feelin. I really got the spirit.”
My Adjusting World-View and New Affinities
It wasn’t until the end of college,

my undergraduate year, when my perspectives broadened further and

I was able to recognize where reggae’s
spirit took root. That is, reggae’s uplifting
and empowering capacity is founded in and expounds
upon the strife and

oppression of the
colonized body.
In reggae’s earliest
development, its
foundations lie upon
the strife and o
pression of the black
diaspora in Jamaica
—from the age of s
lavery through and be
yond reggae’s inception.
It is a music intensely concerned with resisting authority and raising social consciousness.

My understanding of reggae as a social movement developed concurrently with my affinity for reading and writing poetry. Creative Writing 1150 and the community of writers in my undergraduate university changed my life in ways few experiences have. I fell in love with William Carlos Williams’s red wheel barrow and I fell in love with the people who would understand my love for this red wheel barrow. “So much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow // glistening in rain / water // beside the white / chickens.”3 I am forever floored by this poem’s vibrancy and what I later learned to call ‘Keats’s Negative Capability,’ or the great potential that sits behind the unknown. So much
depends upon this red wheel barrow—a tool of the farm, the food source, the provider; the livelihood of the farmer, the life of the consumer. And these chickens! What do they know of a wheel barrow’s significance?

But there they are, white, beside a wheel barrow that their caretaker relies upon for work, for food, to feed. Williams’s wheel barrow and its glaze turned me on to the potency and possibility of poetry.

Poetry soon became my medium of expression and artistic play. Language became new to me, forever renewable.

Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion, Jah
I want to begin examining the relationship between Rastafari and Modernist poetics with the Rastafari and their practices with language called Iyaric, I-speak, dread-talk, or what I’ll call Rasta Speech. But in order to understand Rasta Speech, an overview of Rastafari is indispensable. The relationship between history, culture, identity, and speech is One for the Rastafari. On November 2, 1930, Ras Tafari (1892 – 1975), King of Ethiopia, was crowned.
Emperor, King of Kings, and for the followers of Marcus Garvey, a hugely influential Black Rights/Back-to-Africa figure, they were affirmed by Garvey’s prophecies validated by this coronation.

Upon his ascent to Emperor, Ras Tafari took the name Haile Selassie I among ‘Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah,’ ‘King of Kings of Ethiopia,’ and ‘Elect of God,’ ‘Jah.’ November 2nd, Coronation Day, or ‘Crownation’ Day, is arguably the most clearly defined threshold of Rastafari’s surfacing from within Jamaica as it took place during a culminating point of social and economic unrest in the west, the spread of print communication, and religious fervor being met by prophesy. Out of the hills and ghettos of Jamaica, Rastafari arose as “a grassroots religious consciousness which stresses a black identity and belongs to a culturally hybrid people.”
Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887 – 1940) is credited as perhaps the most influential progenitor, the patron saint, of Rastafari. A Jamaican advocate for the growing ‘Back-to-Africa’ movement, Garvey empowered the African diaspora in Jamaica as well as England and the United States by sharing his prophesies: “Look to the east when a black King shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near”, “we shall worship HIM (His Imperial Majesty) through the spectacles of Ethiopia,” and his philosophies, “We must create a second emancipation—an
mancipation of our minds.” Garvey sought to unite the black diaspora with what he considered their African homeland and even established a shipping line to facilitate this process. Garvey’s organization, the United Negro Improvement Association, constituted at its peak the largest Black Nationalist movement in the western hemisphere.

His movement worked to develop a new, heightened, awareness of the significance of the
Black racial identity.

It is apparent that it is left to the negro to play such a part in human affairs—for when we look at the Anglo-Saxon we see him full of greed, avarice, no mercy, no love, no charity … yes, a new civilization, a new culture shall spring up among our people.

This new culture, an active awareness of the African diaspora “powered the process of self-empowerment, which constitutes the bedrock that informs and enlightens the purveyors of the Rastafarian concept, philosophy and spirituality.” Jamaicans like Leonard Howell and Joseph Hibbert saw parallels and convergences between these prophecies and their individual realities, their common history and modern world events, and took it upon themselves to proclaim and inform their societies of the connections between Garvey, scripture, and Emperor Haile Selassie I. Howell and Hibbert, and many others, saw these parallels and convergences between the history of Ethiopia, a sovereign nation for over 3000 years, and Biblical references to the throne of King David. The Rastafari see the grand coronation of “The Black King,” Haile Selassie whose Solomonic Dynasty is linked to King David, as a prophetic event mentioned in Revelation 5: “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”
The empowerment provided by these scriptural realizations, the heightening of black racial pride and sensitivity, gave rise to Rastafari as a cultural vehicle between history, the ancient past, the scripture, and modern world affairs. This Afrocentric Jamaican perspective seeks to redefine the colonized and post-colonial blackness by re-asserting its African identity. Rastafari, therefore, blossomed into a faith and perspective that reclaims blackness through its African lineage, redefines blackness by resisting the oppressive Westernized cultures which previously enslaved and presently strong-arm the descendants of Africa.
Language as a Mechanism for Control

Among the weapons of control imposed upon the slave, language proves to have perhaps the most lasting effect beyond emancipation. Philosopher Frantz Fanon puts it succinctly enough, “Let’s be serious. Speaking pidgin means imprisoning the black man and perpetuating a conflictual situation where the white man infects the black man with extremely toxic foreign bodies.”7 In addition to forcefully removing tribes-people from their homeland, Western slavers forcefully removed their agencies of language. A harbor’s dockyard in Africa was filled with the voices of Western and native African tongues, mutually distinct and sequestered. And upon arrival in the West-Indies the enslaved were imposed upon by the ruling empire through both physical and mental indoctrination, aggressively and passively, through a process called ‘seasoning.’ That is, to season a slave is to assimilate them into culture and society of their new circumstances, ensuring their ability to get around the plantation. This seasoning would clearly affect language too as many languages converged upon the plantation, and the seasoned slaves unwittingly developed creole Afro-Jamaican cultures we know today.8
English is still the ruling language in Jamaica. English is the standard by which all else is compared and judged because English is the parlance of the imperial forces over the island and the people they filled it with. Since the days of slavery, through hybridization of cultures, classes, and their respective languages, Jamaica’s poor have developed the Jamaican Creole, Patwa. However, through education and exposure to the middle class, Patwa has formed a continuum with Standard English where they inform one another and build upon each other’s lexicon. Consider, then, the Rastafarian perspective rooted in reclaiming and redefining blackness within the African diaspora. This continuum between Patwa and English is obfuscating the roots of these creolized peoples and the Rastafari have developed a solution. Rasta Speech, with a lingual base in Patwa, heightened by its Garveyist awareness, innovates language and designs its own lexicon in an act of social protest.
Dread Talk
Rex M. Nettleford, an early Jamaican scholar on the Rastafarian movement quotes Theodor Adorno to reinforce the resistant Rasta Speech: “Social protest manifests itself in language change. For defiance of society includes defiance of its language.” Jamaican poet and researcher, Velma Pollard, examines Rasta Speech in depth in her book, Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari, where she synthesizes Nettleford’s understanding of Adorno’s ‘protest through language’ as it applies to the Rastafari. Nettleford defends the implied reaction of the Rasta’s impulsive semantic urge simply “to call old social categories by new and fashionable borrowings” and the creation of a body of ‘I-words’ as part of their “small but pointedly relevant lexicon of normative-descriptive word-symbols.”
Pollard does the work of a linguistic researcher and breaks Rasta Speech into three communicable categories. In the first category, known items bear new meanings. For instance words like /chant/, /riizn/ (‘reason’), and /babilan/ (Babylon) are biblical words brought back into a modern usage. To /chant/ is to discuss or talk about religious matters, usually to the accompaniment of Niabinghi drums; To /riizn/ is to discuss or talk, synonymous with /chant/, but without the drums; And /babilan/ refers to an oppressive system or an extension of it like a policeman. These words in utterance convey a code, display a self—that of the Rasta. These words have been appropriated and repurposed to serve the Rasta and his or her reality.
The second category identified by Pollard consists of words “that bear the weight of their phonological implications.” That is, these words are in part recognizable as English in origin, but have been altered in order to phonologically align with the words’ meanings. For instance, instead of using the word ‘understand,’ the Rasta would say /ovastan/ (overstand). In order for one to comprehend or control an idea, they must stand over it, not under it. Or instead of saying ‘oppress,’ the Rasta would say ‘/dounpres/.’ If one is being pressed down as the Rasta usually sees him or herself to be, the pressure cannot be up (‘oppress’ phonologically sounds like ‘up-press’). As a purely oral tradition, Rasta Speech has a flexibility and phonological freedom that recorded languages do not.9
The third category, and perhaps the most identifiable in the Rasta’s lexicon, Pollard identifies as ‘/ai/ words.’ She first points out that in Patwa, the Jamaican Standard English pronoun ‘I’ is replaced by /mi/ which slides over I, my, mine, and me according to the context. This ‘I’ refused by the Jamaican Creole is picked up and repurposed by the Rasta. Phonologically, /ai/ is the predominant sound in the Rastafarian language “though its implications are far more extensive that what the simple SJE pronoun ‘I’ could ever bear.” /ai/ not only serves as a pronominal indicator, the singular/ai/ or plural /ai an ai/, but as a prefix to some nouns and as a replacement for the first sound in varying words of varying functions in the sentence—/aital/ for vital, pure, or wholesome; /aital/ describes Rasta food in the way Kosher describes Jewish fare. /aidren/ for brethren, /aidren/ are specifically other followers of Rastafari, others of the same worldview and spirit.
The Lion’s Roar

Out of the hills and ghettos of Jamaica, Rasta Speech subverts the language of British rule and is spoken with pride from an inventive, invented, and self-reflexive culture. These (/ai/) I-words are to my mind and others’ what Author Marcia Douglas likens to the ‘lion’s roar.’ For the Rasta, I, the declaration of self, is an “unapologetic affirmation” reaching “for transcendence and an African Zion.” ‘I’ is larger than its speaker. It calls simultaneously inward and outward, to the self and to the African diaspora—to those who’ve had their identity forced away from them. In her paper, The Rastalogy of I&I: Writing into I-finity, Douglas embodies the anthropologist, the linguist, the creative writer, the teacher, and the observer. As a woman from Jamaica, she is both inside and outside her subject matter and provides an empowering examination of I&I (/ai an ai/), its resistance against and its deconstruction of the English language: “Rasta Speech is intent on precisely this dismantling, pushing the I to outer limits of ‘overstanding.’”
I&I, a doubling of the I, a repetition and fortification of the I, is not merely a plurality equivalent to ‘we.’ The Rasta will invoke I&I as a semblance of her singular self reaching for transcendence with her fellow Rastafari, her fellow people bonded through suffering. For her I “collides with community, nature, and the divine to become a reinforced first person singular or, first person plural, I&I,” Douglas writes, “this I is infinite […] it proliferates outward, the speaker at once sistren, cotton tree, and holy Mt. Zion.” The English I is flipped into a language that “reaffirms and empowers the speaker via multiple levels of agency.” This ‘language of survival’ is not uncommon in contemporary Caribbean, as it is informed by the ‘castrated tongue,’ erasure, and the will to survive. However, the subversion of the English makes Rasta Speech unique among the Caribbean tongues, but it must be seen as more than mere word play; “there is urgency in this remaking of tongue […] This is an I conscious of asserting itself over the great ‘forgetting machine’ and imperial agenda.”
Unlike English, Rasta Speech is maintained as an oral tradition. It remains essentially untethered by institution; its spellings and rules of grammar are never settled, always in flux, open to transcendence through its speakers, its receivers, and their realities. Rasta Speech is free of the constraints of dictionaries, rendering it a truly organic form of its people. “Codification creates boundaries the imagination must fight against, and Rastafari as a community of free thought will have nothing to do with the imposition of forced rules and limitations.”9 This point I will bring up again, as the Modernists I concern myself with seek to break this very codification, to free the imagination from the rigid yoke we call English.
Arguably now in the age of technology, Rasta Speech has been pinned to a permanent medium, although the medium is not one of institutional prestige like the dictionary. Matter of fact, this medium, while adored worldwide, is also stigmatized and carries the burdens of race and class. Reggae, the premier and lasting gift from Rastafari to the world, is the record and perpetuating vehicle of Rasta Speech. In Jamaica, “popular culture is often a window into the deeper recesses of society,” and I’d like to examine reggae as my window into Rasta Speech. Again, as a privileged white man from Southern California, reggae is all I had for music which lauded peace, resistance, and unity—what the Rasta would call I-unity. 

Cultural Reproduction of Rastafari
Without a doubt, reggae music has been and continues to be the principal form for Rastafari’s spread across the globe. Reggae, that drum and bass driven, melodically uplifting, lyrically subordinate form is a rich piece of cultural reproduction, and for the sake of this paper, my entrance into Rasta Speech as it relates to my life experiences. As Yasus Afari acknowledges in his book, Overstanding Rastafari, “the imaginative use of the I & I language serves to re-mould, re-shape and re-direct the perception of both the Jamaican and the English language and by the same process revolutionize and re-calibrate the mentality of the psyche, within the sphere of influence of Jamaica […] To this end, music has and continues to play an increasingly significant role in the Rastafarian mission of liberation and self determination.”
Reggae music is naturally painted with the traditions of African rhythms preserved in the folk and Afro-religious music of Jamaica. The Niabinghi, ceremonial drumming named after the Rastafarian branch called, Niabinghi, one of several branches of Rastafari, echoes the resistance of slaves during the Slave Revolutions when Maroon guerillas and conspiring slaves would communicate and strike fear into their enemies with this drumming.  

It echoes too of ancestral Mother Africa where drumming traditions are rooted and were spread to the islands by way of slave ships, traditions cherished and passed through generations of Jamaica’s black residents despite the efforts of their oppressors. This drumming is the backbone of reggae. It places the music in a tradition of resistance as an act of preservation of identity for the Rastafari. Melodically, reggae took its cues from earlier Jamaican hybrid forms of music—ska and rocksteady. Ska, the forerunner of both rocksteady and reggae is a blend of mambo, jazz, rhythm and blues, and Afro-Jamaican music developed and made popular in the late 1950s, early ‘60s, by artists like Prince Buster (b. 1938) and Don Drummond (1932 – 1969). “To pivot all this is the beat of the ska. To Jamaican musicians ska is the sound of the offbeat stressed on the guitar. Insistent and rhythmic, it’s played on guitar in an up-strumming manner, like an arrow to heaven, not strumming down, as in rock. It sounds like catching your breath, like the ecstatic rhythmic breathing of Zion people in Jamaican black religion, which in turn recalls strong rhythmic breathing (vuumuna ngolo) in Kongo rituals of blessing and healing.”
Less than a decade later, ska gave rise to rocksteady, a slower music emphasized on the second and fourth beats, and it continued the up-stroking guitar of ska. Artists like Alton Ellis and The Maytals popularized rocksteady with their recordings and, as can be heard in these particular performers, the Garveyist/Rastafarian awareness to local and global issues began to influence the lyrics. Soon reggae began to take shape, particularly in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, through artists like Niabinghi drummer and Rasta leader, Count Ossie, bands like The Pioneers, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Jacob Miller and Inner Circle, and musician/producer, Lee “Scratch” Perry. What makes the onset of reggae distinct from rocksteady, musically, is the organ is generally played in a shuffling rhythm, and lyrically, the vast majority of reggae’s artists, certainly its dominant personalities, embraced the Rastafarian faith.
Reggae of the Rastafari
The decade of the 1970s was pivotal for Rastafarians and reggae music as well as for Jamaica and the Jamaican culture. The remarkable and outstanding pioneering work of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA along with the early Rastafarians, coupled well with the Black Power movement of the ‘60s, concomitant with the liberal, socialist experiments of the then Jamaican government [...] This created a socio-cultural environment that somehow facilitated the creative expressions of the self-reliance, Afrocentric Rastafarians and the revolutionary message of reggae music.5
As the prevailing object of Rastafarian cultural reproduction, reggae serves for me and the rest of the outside world as a window into the insight (I-sight?) of the Rasta, the virtues, loves, concerns and experiences of blackness in an oppressive social environment. By exploring the history of their oppression, evoking key members of their community, past and present, and by keeping true to their faith by using language, by calling forth I&I as a means of socio-political resistance, the Rasta reggae artists simultaneously reclaim and define their Afrocentric identity while edifying their audience’s under(over)standings of the African diaspora.
Consider again what Marcia Douglas points out, that Rasta Speech is an oral tradition. It is not shackled to a recorded history, freeing it from the rigor of institution. This also means that the history of Rasta Speech and its people exist solely in the shared conversations between Rastafari and within their cultural reproductions like reggae. To spell this out, I want to look at the lyrics of a few of my favorite artists, all Rasta, all conjuring history, I&I, and social awareness.

Burning Spear’s “Slavery Days”
Burning Spear’s song “Slavery Days” appears on his 1975 album, Marcus Garvey. Musically, the tenants of reggae are present, and through repetition, lyrically, we can get a sense of a chant, mental inscribing of language. As its title suggests, “Slavery Days” looks back to the history of suffering, the roots of black diaspora. Burning Spear asks, ‘do you remember how they beat us, how they used us?’

Do you remember the days of slavery?
Do you remember the days of slavery?

And how they beat us
And how they worked us so hard
And they used us
'Til they refuse us

Do you remember the days of slavery?

And a big fat bull
We usually pull it everywhere
We must pull it
With shackles around our necks
And I can see it all no more

Do you remember the days of slavery?

My brother feels it
Including my sisters too
Some of us survive
Showing them that we are still alive

Do you remember the days of slavery?

History can recall, history can recall
History can recall the days of slavery
Oh slavery days! Oh slavery days!

While I remember, please remember
Do you do you do you, do you do you do you
Oh slavery days! Oh slavery days!
Reggae songs such as this behave as mechanisms of memory. When a people are denied the agency to record their history, the archiving of history takes new forms like the lyrics to this song, or the namesake of the album, Marcus Garvey. Burning Spear’s “Queen of the Mountain”
Another example of this inventive form of record keeping, one based in oral and musical traditions, not unlike reggae’s use of Niabinghi-style drumming, is Burning Spear’s “Queen of the Mountain” on his 1986 album, Resistance. Again we get a sense of chanting with repeated lines and phrases, but this song is written for Queen Nanny, an Obeah of the Maroons and leader of revolutions. Western history books tend to overlook her influence in the emancipation of slaves, however, Burning Spear has documented her in this song, almost calling out to her, bringing her into the present.

Queen of the Mountain
Queen of the Mountain
Some call her Nanny
Oh Nanny
Oh Nanny

Three historical parishes in Jamaica
Saint James, Saint Thomas, Calling Saint Catherine
Open the little slave book, run come take a look
At our history, our culture, our roots, our livity, our people

Queen of the Mountain
Queen of the Mountain
Queen of the Mountain
Some call her Nanny
Oh Nanny
Nanny, Nanny, Oh Nanny
Open the little slave book, open the little slave book
a make run come take a look

Open the little slave book, open the little slave book
a make run come take a look
Take a look, Take a look, Take a look
Oh Nanny, Nanny, Nanny
Oh, Nanny, Nanny, Nanny, Nanny, Nanny, Nanny
Alton Ellis’s “Rasta Spirit”

Alton Ellis has grown to become one of my favorite musical artists. His music and vocals, progenitors of and responsible for rocksteady and its influence over reggae, have a swing and groove unlike other artists—his voice always sounds on the edge of breaking, the way Bob Marley’s does too, the occasional crack lending to the organic and impassioned performance. Ellis’s song, “Rasta Spirit,” is a testament to the overwhelming tendency of I&I, the Rasta spirit. And like a religious hymn, with similar tactics of repetition as witnessed before, “Rasta Spirit” reinforces the I, uplifts it, and empowers it. To have the ‘Rasta spirit’ is to engage with the world consciously, ‘people can hear every word you say,’ and to stand strong despite its attempts to control you, ‘let them know that you’re strong too.’

Real to the sons and daughters of Jah Rastafari
Heal to the one who got the faith in Selasie I, I&I

Listen to me, I said I really got the feelin
I got the Rasta feelin, I really got the spirit
I got the Rasta Spirit, I got the Rasta feelin
I said I got the feelin, yes, I said I got the feelin
I got the Rasta feelin
Got the spirit

Look here, hear what I say
People can hear every word you say
Don’t let them think you’re …. away
Cuz you got the spirit, cuz I got the spirit
I got the Rasta spirit, got the spirit
I got the feelin now
Look here, Better hear what I say
Oh, people can see everything you do
Let them know that you’re strong too
Yes, because you got the spirit

Everybody say, you got the spirit
Rastafari got the feelin everyday, everyway

A Rasta got the spirit
Don’t you know, got the spirit
Rastafarai got the spirit

Come here, hear what I say everyday
Got to hear what I say everyday
Gotta hear this
Got the feelin
Got the feelin
Peter Tosh’s “Downpressor Man”

Peter Tosh, who gained popularity working with Bob Marley and Bunny Wailer, writes highly conscious songs of protest and empowerment. Always seeking to inform and unite, Tosh’s work engages the Rastafari and meditates upon it, uses Rasta Speech to uplift his words and push them toward transcendence. “Downpressor Man” is featured on Tosh’s 1977 album, Equal Rights, among other song titles like, “Get Up, Stand Up,” “Stepping Razor,” and “Jah Guide.”

Downpressor man, where you gonna run to?
Downpressor man, where you gonna run to?
Downpressor man, where you gonna run to?
All along that day

You gonna run to the sea, but the sea will be boiling
When you run to the sea, the sea will be boiling
When you run to the sea, the sea will be boiling
All along that day
You gonna run to the rocks, the rocks will be melting
When you run to the rocks, the rocks will be melting
When you run to the rocks, the rocks will be melting
I said, all along that day

So I said
Downpressor man, where you gonna run to?
I said, Downpressor man, where you gonna run to?
I said, Downpressor man, where you gonna run to?
All along that day

You drink your big champagne and laugh
You drink your big champagne and laugh
You drink your big champagne and laugh
All along that day

I wouldn't like to be a flea under your collar, man
I wouldn’t like to be a flea under your collar, man
I wouldn’t like to be a flea under your collar
All along that day

You can run but you can't hide
You can run but you can't hide
You can run but you can't hide
Telling you, all along that day
You gonna run to the Lord beggin' him to hide you
You gonna run to the Lord beggin' him to hide you
You gonna run to Jah beggin' to hide you
All, all along that day

And I said Downpressor Man, where you gonna run to?
Where you gonna run to, Downpressor Man?
Where you gonna run to?
I said, all along, along that

Downpressor Man, Downpressor Man
Downpressor Man, Downpressor Man
Wait, Downpressor Man
Where you gonna run to, Downpressor man?
I don't know where you gonna run to
All along that day
Downpressor man
You can't run, you can't bribe Jah-Jah
Can't call him in a bar
Fe can drink some devil soup
Can't bribe him to run a car now
Can't test him faith

Downpressor Man, Downpressor Man
Downpressor Man, Downpressor Man, don’t run
Downpressor Man, where you gonna run to?

Downpressor man, you can't bribe no one
Them no want no money, them run'f money
That money get funny, Downpressor Man
Peter Tosh is continually declaring ‘downpressor man’ as if by naming the object, he maintains control. Written to this object, Tosh’s words evoke biblical images of burning and isolation, as if a warning, or reminder of where Babylon leads. The Abyssinians’ “I and I”
Lastly, in researching for this project, The Abyssinians’ album, Satta Massagana, grew to become my favorite listen. Their easy vocals remind me of the Motown I grew up listening to, but there is a spirituality ingrained within their music which strikes a chord within me that Motown never did. Their song, “I and I” is meditative in the way it summons and chants I&I. Between these utterances of I&I, we hear words of hope and livity, to love yourself and your brothers. We are reminded, ‘united we stand, and divided we fall.’ This song has become one of my favorites, perhaps, because of its simplicity—simple yet reverent and uplifting. I&I&I&I, we live in I-nity, ‘marching to a better situation.’

I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
Save yourself, oh baby at least (I and I and I)
Love yourself equally (I and I and I)

United we stand (united we stand)
And divided we fall
We're marching to a better situation
The whole world is a new generation

I and I and I and I (I and I and I)

I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
Love your brother respectfully (I and I and I)
Save each other truthfully (I and I and I)
United we stand (united we stand)
And divided we fall
We're marching to a better situation
The whole world is a new generation

I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
I and I and I and I (I and I and I)

Love yourself respectfully (I and I and I)
I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
I and I and I and I (I and I and I)
Dread-Talk in Film

Recently while I was working my coffee shop job and listening to a mixtape of my favorite reggae, I was recommended by a customer a film to watch which he couldn’t speak of highly enough. The customer said the film, Rockers (1978), was what turned him on to the conditions of the Rastafari. The film I’d consider a coming-of-age, meandering narrative around a circle of influential reggae artists at the peak of reggae’s initial step into the limelight of the world’s popular culture. Throughout the film, Jamaican Patwa is spoken by its actors, and fortunately, for people like me, subtitles display the general sense and meaning of the dialogue. However, Rasta Speech makes its way into the film in many instances, most of which between identified Rastas. The film begins with a ‘Grounation,’ a ceremony of Niabinghi and chanting. The first shot opens upon a group of men, dreadlocked, smoking (presumably) ganja from a chalice, about six of them drumming, all under a canopy of wood and thatch. A declaration of, “Jah, Rastafari,” rises from the men, and they being chanting Satta Massaganal1 when a man emerges from within and sits front and center, between the group and movie audience—looks directly into the camera and speaks:
Greetings and love.
To one and all.
In my presence, I-preme coverage of I heights
Love for everyone everywhere.
It is known that the cooperation of all colors of people—
voice the decision of I heights.
Free everyone—liberate fully everywhere.
Now everyone just cooperate with the love of I heights to survive.
Knowing that in this world—war is explosive.
The ways of the One solve the problem in the heights of I coverage in full.
So it is I-rey, Loveful heights.
And the heavily dreaded Rasta turns to take his place at the side, standing over the drummers.
To elucidate again the gaping hole in my paper, I have never spoken with an identified Rasta. My only contact, as with so much of the world, has been through the reproductions of Rastafari—reggae music, film, and literature. I am of the mind that exploring Rastafari through these modes of cultural reproduction is, in fact, valid. For how could one contain a faith and history like Rastafari strictly to its flesh and blood adherents? The adherents made these songs and movies to put Rastafari in conversation with the world outside, to reach those who’ve not been exposed to Rastafari, thus existing as piece of a larger whole for consideration. These pieces, in effect, are no different than the pieces of Modernism, the manifestos and poems of its artists. They too exists as idiosyncratic pieces of a larger whole for my consideration and examination.

Modernist Innovations
As a poet, I take a keen interest in language. How it serves or works against me as the writer, for or against readers or listeners. On the page, my work carries with it a cacophony of contexts and meanings, only half of which I control by recording them; the other half, the reader brings to the page themselves. I invest in Reader Response Criticism, thus I acknowledge both the fluidity of language and its rigidity—how the responsibility of meaning-making is left almost entirely to the receiver of language who can abide by the rules of language or can ignore them entirely, free to make meaning as they desire. The overwhelming majority of Modernist work I know seeks to service the latter reader, to break preconceived notions of language and show how language is a breakable structure to the ends of imagination. I think of James Joyce’s Finnegan’s Wake:
The great fall of the offwall entailed at such short notice the pftjschute of Finnegan, erse solid man, that the humptyhillhead of humself prumptly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumptytumtoes: and their upturnpikepointandplace is at the knock out in the park where oranges have been laid to rust upon the green since dev-linsfirst loved livvy.
I think of Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.
Joyce and Stein break the codified structures of language and meaning making. When Joyce writes, “[…] where oranges have been laid to rust upon the green since dev-lins first loved livvy,” I am forced to stop and consider his language, how it resonates within me, and how I make sense of it. ‘Where oranges have been laid,’ is clear enough: I imagine a grove of citrus trees, not unlike the groves I grew up playing in in Southern California, and the oranges which have fallen from their maternal branches onto the ground. To play on ‘rest,’ Joyce uses ‘rust,’ a perhaps more perfect image of the resting oranges, dusting over with verdigris mold, a citric rusting. ‘Rust’ sings like ‘rest’ but includes with it the decay of the fallen fruit ‘upon the green’ grass and leaves and duff. “Dev-lins first loved livvy” is more difficult for me to grasp, but I hear ‘Dublin’s first love(d), Liffey,’ or ‘Devils first loved living.’ With a little knowledge of James Joyce as an Irishman, ‘Dublin’s first love(d), Liffey’ is probably more aligned with what Joyce would be concerned with as a writer, Liffey being the river which runs through Dublin’s center. However, I cannot shake ‘Devils first loved living’ from possibility. Early in Finnegans Wake, Joyce writes of Adam and Eve, a story of Genesis I was raised with, and the Devil’s role in that story involved forbidden fruit, one that tarnished the life of humanity. Are Joyce’s rusting oranges fruit of the fallen? That is, like Humpty Dumpty, mankind has fallen, is rusting like molded oranges, at the pleasure of the evil. This doesn’t stray far from the eye of Rastafari. Life, living, livvy, the Rasta’s ‘livity’ is sustenance for evil, a first love of the Devil—I-tal or virtuous living is what the Devil seeks to consume and transform into his own product, that of Babylon.
And Stein’s work fares no differently from Joyce’s. She writes at the onset of Tender Buttons, “A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.” As the first piece, A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS sets the tone for the work that follows and behaves for me like a statement of intent. ‘A carafe that is a blind glass’ transmogrifies the carafe, a seemingly simple object, a glass pitcher of sorts, into a glass that is concerned with vision, blindness. The carafe is no longer the carafe I knew but an object of transformation, a lens through which I can see anew. It is both ‘a spectacle and nothing strange.’ This new carafe shows us a ‘single hurt color,’ suggesting that through this newness we will find emotion in places previously rendered without inherent emotion like color. This new carafe is not simply an object in and of itself but a ‘system of pointing.’ It transcends definition, defies language. The way this new carafe, this transcendental object, is ‘not unordered in not resembling’ is resisting the dominant order of meaning-making—it denies singularity and opens itself to as many possibilities as sets of eyes that rest upon it. Like Rasta Speech, Stein’s language in Tender Buttons and Joyce’s innovations in Finnegan’s Wake challenge the paradigm that seeks to define us with its oppressive linguistics rather than letting use them to define ourselves.
Stein and Joyce are among the early Modernists, Walt Whitman is another, and these poets each wrote from a place of resistance in search of unity through multiplicity—what Rastas would call I-unity, a unity which considers the power and strength of differences between individual perspectives, the I&I. As Modernism began to take hold over the discourse of the day around the 1910s through the 1930s, poets began to attempt defining Modernism based on its roots in Imagism. What it should Modernism be, what should it look like, how might it best be performed? One of the spaces charting this defining process is the manifesto. Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and William Carlos Williams all put their thoughts on poetry, that transcendent exploration of language as feeling, feeling as language, onto the page. In Ezra Pound’s A Retrospect, Pound declares three principles of the Imagists, an early 20th century movement that gave rise to the Modernists who embraced Imagism’s clarity of image and sharp language.
Amy Lowell, an Imagist herself makes similar declarations but from within the movement, and with twice as many points to be made. William Carlos Williams, in his book, Spring and All, which is arguably a manifesto despite its semblance of a Modernist book of poetry, not only makes his statements on the role of poetry and the imagination, which all point toward Pound and Lowell, but he puts his statements to work throughout. What I am hoping to reveal is that the work of these poets, their belief in the transcendence of language, parallels that of the Rasta. The differences between the two stem from where the desire to innovate language lays root. Rastafari innovate out of a crucial rebellion, the Modernists innovate out of a privileged rebellion (which is a rebellion I believe in: the proactivity of the privileged to rebel against the current, unjust, and socially unconcerned paradigm.)

Pillars of Modern Poetry
In the spring or early summer of 1912, ‘H. D.,’ Richard Aldington and myself decided that we were agreed upon the three [Modernist] principles following:
1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.
In this short index, Pound is laying bear what he and two other poets see as the effective tenants in Imagism, or what he refers to as ‘a new fashion in poetry.’ Remember that Modernism took these Imagist tenants and pushed them further as we will see in Williams’ Spring and All. Like the Rasta, Pound believed objects and subjects deserve a direct treatment. That is, abstraction and passive language do not serve the individual poet nor their audience. It distracts from the reality of the poem, its poet, its audience, and its potential for transcendence is weakened; it is less pure.
To push poetry toward transcendence, Pound continues: poetry should ‘use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.’ If we can presume this pays into the clarity, or purity of the image, of the poem, we can presume that the inverse would also be true—to use no word that detracts from the presentation.’ Think of Rasta Speech, the ‘downpress,’ the ‘overstand.’ In English, ‘oppress’ phonetically resembles ‘up-press,’ and ‘understand’ contradicts itself in meaning—how could one comprehend that which they are standing under? The Rasta see these prefixes as detracting from the reality of who is presenting the language and who is receiving it, so they fix them. Think too of the Rasta’s ‘unity’—‘I-unity’—which, ‘I,’ as the lion’s roar to the African diaspora, is in fact far more unified, unifying, in meaning than the English ‘unity’ (you-unity). ‘You’ differentiates speaker from receiver which stands contrary to the English definition of unity. And ‘appreciate,’ too, is a word which, to the Rasta, is counterproductive, detracting, impure, so she will use ‘appreci-love’ instead. After all, ‘appreciate’ closely aligns with the phonetics of ‘appreci-hate,’ and appreciation is incompatible with hate.
In his final point, Pound requires the poetic sequence to follow not the arbitrary rhythms of metronomic meter, rather a musicality. Charles Olsen, an American postwar poet publishing in the late 40s and into the 60s, contributed a manifest titled, Projective Verse. In it, Olson expands upon Pound’s Modernist notion of breaking the metronome within the poetic sequence, “verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath.” Olson declares the act of writing poetry an act of the body—not just the hand that writes, but the breath of the body producing it, the body listening to it. The poet should work from ‘down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs.”

The poem, if written in this bodily projective verse, will substantiate the individual poet while transcending its readers or listeners—the poem’s language is of the poet’s body. After all, ‘each of us must save himself after his own fashion,’ and I believe the Rasta would agree. Speech is the force of language and to harness it is to holster a weapon of both self-definition and resistance—both identity and community.
Nearly parroting Pound, Amy Lowell published in 1915 a manifesto as the preface to her anthology, Some Imagist Poets. In it she restates Pound’s insights on concentration and clarity and exactness. She also expands upon rhythm and the need to break the metronomic tendencies of the poets of yore. Lowell writes, we seek to “create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms which merely echo old moods.” Lowell ties rhythm to history, identifies how rhythm can ‘echo old moods.’ This echoing of old moods, to the poet, is perhaps a faux pas. It is not making anew. It performs as a cliché and, according to an overwhelming number of poets, clichés can be the death of poetry. But what if that ‘old mood’ must be conjured? What if by embracing the old mood, we are bringing to surface the old mood to show that today’s mood is no different than the old? In the framework of Rastafari, I am thinking of reggae’s use of Niabinghi. This is an old rhythm, an old mood of resistance and cultural identification. The old rhythm of Niabinghi drums, in reggae, praise its history, its roots, because today, social conditions are still working against the African diaspora. The Niabinghi resonating from within reggae is calling out in protest. For the Rasta, the old mood today, though old, is still relevant, still necessary.

Every Word Being Evolved
William Carlos Williams published Spring and All in 1923 when Modernism had already established itself. In 1923, Modernism was the avant-garde in full effect and Williams had a vision for the social potentials of poetry. Williams makes a case for poetry, the art of language, as a renewable space for the imagination: “the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words – or whatever it may be.” However, words are troubled and “The imagination, freed from the handcuffs of ,, art ’’, takes the lead!” ‘Art’ puts the imagination within the limits of its definitions—the word, ‘art’ imposes itself upon the imagination. And to break it free of language’s limitations, Williams calls for utter destruction—a metaphorical holocaust of everything, everyone, to cleanse humanity of all meaning and to start again. “This is something never before attempted,” he writes, “None to remain ; nothing but the lower vertebrates, the mollusks, insects and plants.”

This final and self inflicted holocaust has been all for love, for sweetest love, that together the human race, yellow, black brown, red and white, agglutinated into one enormous soul may be gratified with the sight and retire to heaven of heavens content to rest on its laurels.
‘All for love, for sweetest love, that together the human race […] may be gratified with the sight,’ rings Rasta, rings for an I-nity between all peoples of the world where oppression and suffering cease to exist. I believe that the Rastafari seek this renewal through the innovation of speech. This newness invented by subverting the colonizer’s tongue, this self-conscious use of language, Williams would say, would keep us “beside growing understanding”—or ‘beside growing overstanding’ if Mr. Williams followed Haile Selassie I. Perhaps that was a fatuous parallel to draw, I don’t think it’s a stretch when considering what follows:

In fact now, for the first time, everything IS new. Now at last the perfect effect is being witlessly discovered. The terms „veracity” „actuality” „real” „natural” „sincere” are being discussed at length, every word in the discussion being evolved from an identical discussion which took place the day before yesterday.
‘Every word being evolved,’ I read ‘veracity’ as ‘I-racity,’ ‘natural’ as the actual term, ‘I-tal,’ and ‘sincere’ would certainly not do—sin should play no part in sincerity. And when Williams says these words ‘are being discussed at length,’ I am reminded of ‘reasoning,’ the Rasta practice of deep, spiritual, I-searching conversations between Rastas. Williams’s vision for the world anew doesn’t seem too far from the Rastafari perspective, simply, Williams and the Rastas approach the new world from very different places.  
I&I for I Still Outside
At the end of this examination, I don’t think anything changed. No questions were posed, therefore what answers where there to find? No big realization—no grand revelation. But there must have been something. There had to be, if only on my own personal level. That is, I think I learned something about myself or gained a new perspective, a greater understanding of what it means to resist downnession, to form and define a community, an I-dren, so rich in faith and culture that it topples any present authority, if not immediately, then gradually through sharing an I-ya consciousness—to start a conversation with someone like myself. For the Rastafari, speech and music are the transcendent forms; for the Modernists, language and the poem. For me, creative writer, I mustn’t forget how these innovators protest the present paradigm through language.
I approached this project unsure of where it might take me. I turned over stone after stone, read as much as I could, retained as much as I could, and then approached a culture I’ve actually experienced very little of. Thankfully I grew up influenced by reggae, I have a genuine interest in this examination, and however, the world of Rastafari remained foreign for decades. And it still is in so many ways. It pains me writing a paper on Rasta Speech without ever talking to a Rasta man or woman. Alas, this leaves space for future exploration of a topic I feel I’ve grown close to. My perspective has widened, deepened; I am moved inexplicably when I hear The Abyssinians sing, “I and I and I and I,” when Peter Tosh condemns the Downpressor Man, declaring the spiritually fortified Rasta who “no want no money. They run’f money.”
I don’t believe I could ever evoke I&I as an insider among the I-dren. I will forever be just out of reach. I, my family, have never suffered in a way that would license my use of the concept. However, I&I has affected me in the process of this project. I can’t help but feel like it coopted me, if just a little. The freedom, the poesy, the innovation and transcendence of I&I, of Rasta Speech in general, is too much what I love about poetry. Poetry and its interrogation of language is a part of my identity. I empathize with the compulsion to use language as a means of questioning the paradigm, of resisting Babylon, those forces who impose themselves upon any being. And it’s this compulsion, I believe that, like my affection for poetry, led me to the Rastafari and their dynamic cultivation of language.
The American Modernist manifestos
and the poetry they inspired illustrate how
Rastafari in both their day-to-day speech and reggae,
the principal vehicle of Rastafarian
cultural reproduction, employ

what the Modernists desire in poetry.
What the Rastafarians consider
a living unity of signifier and signified,
Rasta Speech, these Modern poets exalt
as what Ezra Pound would call

“charged” or “energized” poetry.
What divides these camps, Rasta Speech
and Modern poetry, what inspires their
similarly charged languages can be informed
the world’s history of Colonialism—For the
Rastas who are descendant of the Maroon

communities in Jamaica, 2 Rasta Speech is a
means of self-identification and preservation, community,
and resistance; Alternately, the American
Modernists who are on the winning side of
colonialism, have the freedom to choose where
and when to employ their poetics. They
have the privilege to save their modern

language for the page, the Rastas do not.
My Positioning: I’m Not From Around Here

I have to confess outright that I am an on-again/off-again skeptic of the academy. That is,
I don’t immediately trust the Academic in his or her motive to research within the
humanities—particularly when the Academic is not directly a part of or connected to the region of their study. For instance, me and Jamaica. Certainly the work will be documented and exist for future academics to reflect upon, to draw conclusions about our time and its programming, however, the capitalistic institution within the academy and, at a bureaucratic level, the self-promotion within some intelligencia knells in my conscience and bears my misgivings. I want to be clear, this paper is in pursuit of an academic end but my hope is that I can maintain a transparency in that the paper is rooted in absolute sincerity. And I might make mistakes, but this project is by no means finished. I was born in 1985 and raised on the coast of Southern California where reggae music was a key sound in our culture’s soundtrack. Granted the tidal wave of reggae washed across the world well over a decade before I came around, in San Diego, the music’s prevalence is vital to my personal mixtape from adolescence into adulthood. Bob Marley’s greatest hits, Legends, score my earliest memories of reggae’s shuffling tempo, up-stroke guitars, and uplifting melodies—car rides, beach days, family vacations and social gatherings alike. Bob Marley’s influence is undeniable; his name and spirit permeates the world’s perceptions of reggae, so I don’t feel pressured to carry this dialogue with any focus on Marley. Rather, I am interested in other Rasta artists who use Rasta Speech in their music to not only communicate their culture, but to reinforce it. In middle school, I was introduced to South African artist, Lucky Dube (1964 – 2007), and former Wailer, Peter Tosh (1944 – 1987), on the way to water polo tournaments. My coach played his CDs for us on the commute from San Diego to wherever the tournament was held. He was also the man who introduced me to ideas and practices of Rastafari. Looking back, I don’t believe he was a follower of Rastafari. I think he was at the least a product of reggae’s remarkable entrance upon world-wide pop culture in the 1970s. Once I entered high school, I began seeking reggae on my own. I was growing into the world, becoming more aware as the youth will do, and reggae began to speak to me in ways other genres did not—peaceful lyrics and melodies, celebrative and alive, the love and sincerity. I could hear these things not only reggae’s artists but in its followers too. More and more the metamorphic capabilities of reggae confirmed within me.
Now at 28 years old, nearly every Sunday morning for the past ten years I have listened to reggae for a couple of hours at least, putting into motion a day of mindfulness and respect toward self and others. On Sundays I take care in relaxation and labor, family and strangers, wilderness and domestication. Perhaps it’s an echoing spirituality I carry from my adolescence in church, but this music seems to meet that essence and uplift it. As Alton Ellis asserts, “I got the Rasta feelin. I really got the spirit.”
My Adjusting World-View and New Affinities
It wasn’t until the end of college,

my undergraduate year, when my
perspectives broadened further and

I was able to recognize where reggae’s
spirit took root. That is, reggae’s uplifting
and empowering capacity is founded in and expounds
upon the strife and

oppression of the
colonized body.
In reggae’s earliest
development, its
foundations lie upon
the strife and o
pression of the black
diaspora in Jamaica
—from the age of s
lavery through and be
yond reggae’s inception.
It is a music intensely concerned with resisting authority and raising social consciousness.

My understanding of reggae as a social movement developed concurrently with my affinity for reading and writing poetry. Creative Writing 1150 and the community of writers in my undergraduate university changed my life in ways few experiences have. I fell in love with William Carlos Williams’s red wheel barrow and I fell in love with the people who would understand my love for this red wheel barrow. “So much depends // upon // a red wheel / barrow // glistening in rain / water // beside the white / chickens.” I am forever floored by this poem’s vibrancy and what I later learned to call ‘Keats’s Negative Capability,’ or the great potential that sits behind the unknown. So much
depends upon this red
wheel barrow--a tool
of the farm, the food
source, the provider; the
livelihood of the farmer,
the life of the consumer.
And these chickens! What
do they know of a wheel
barrow’s significance?

But there they are, white,
beside a wheel barrow
that their caretaker relies
upon for work, for food,
to feed. Williams’s
wheel barrow and its glaze
turned me on to the potency
and possibility of poetry.

Poetry soon became my
medium of expression and
artistic play. Language
became new to me, forever
renewable.

Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion, Jah
I want to begin examining the relationship between Rastafari and Modernist poetics with the Rastafari and their practices with language called Iyaric, I-speak, dread-talk, or what I’ll call Rasta Speech. But in order to understand Rasta Speech, an overview of Rastafari is indispensable. The relationship between history, culture, identity, and speech is One for the Rastafari. On November 2, 1930, Ras Tafari (1892 – 1975), King of Ethiopia, was crowned...
Emperor, King of Kings, and for the followers of Marcus Garvey, a hugely influential Black Rights/Back-to-Africa figure, they were affirmed by Garvey’s prophecies validated by this coronation.

Upon his ascent to Emperor, Ras Tafari took the name Haile Selassie I among ‘Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah,’ ‘King of Kings of Ethiopia,’ and ‘Elect of God,’ ‘Jah.’ November 2nd, Coronation Day, or ‘Crownation’ Day, is arguably the most clearly defined threshold of Rastafari’s surfacing from within Jamaica as it took place during a culminating point of social and economic unrest in the west, the spread of print communication, and religious fervor being met by prophesy. Out of the hills and ghettos of Jamaica, Rastafari arose as “a grassroots religious consciousness which stresses a black identity and belongs to a culturally hybrid people.”
Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887 – 1940) is credited as perhaps the most influential progenitor, the patron saint, of Rastafari. A Jamaican advocate for the growing ‘Back-to-Africa’ movement, Garvey empowered the African diaspora in Jamaica as well as England and the United States by sharing his prophesies: “Look to the east when a black King shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near”, “we shall worship HIM (His Imperial Majesty) through the spectacles of Ethiopia,” and his philosophies, “We must create a second emancipation—an
mancipation of our minds.” Garvey sought to unite the black diaspora with what he considered their African homeland and even established a shipping line to facilitate this process. Garvey’s organization, the United Negro Improvement Association, constituted at its peak the largest Black Nationalist movement in the western hemisphere.

His movement worked to develop a new, heightened, awareness of the significance of the
Black racial identity.5

It is apparent that it is left to the negro to play such a part in human affairs—for when we look at the Anglo-Saxon we see him full of greed, avarice, no mercy, no love, no charity … yes, a new civilization, a new culture shall spring up among our people.6

This new culture, an active awareness of the African diaspora “powered the process of self-empowerment, which constitutes the bedrock that informs and enlightens the purveyors of the Rastafarian concept, philosophy and spirituality.”5 Jamaicans like Leonard Howell and Joseph Hibbert saw parallels and convergences between these prophecies and their individual realities, their common history and modern world events, and took it upon themselves to proclaim and inform their societies of the connections between Garvey, scripture, and Emperor Haile Selassie I. Howell and Hibbert, and many others, saw these parallels and convergences between the history of Ethiopia, a sovereign nation for over 3000 years, and Biblical references to the throne of King David. The Rastafari see the grand coronation of “The Black King,” Haile Selassie whose Solomonic Dynasty is linked to King David, as a prophetic event mentioned in Revelation 5: “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”
The empowerment provided by these scriptural realizations, the heightening of black racial pride and sensitivity, gave rise to Rastafari as a cultural vehicle between history, the ancient past, the scripture, and modern world affairs. This Afrocentric Jamaican perspective seeks to redefine the colonized and post-colonial blackness by re-asserting its African identity. Rastafari, therefore, blossomed into a faith and perspective that reclaims blackness through its African lineage, redefines blackness by resisting the oppressive Westernized cultures which previously enslaved and presently strong-arm the descendants of Africa.
Language as a Mechanism for Control

Among the weapons of control imposed upon the slave, language proves to have perhaps the most lasting effect beyond emancipation. Philosopher Frantz Fanon puts it succinctly enough, “Let’s be serious. Speaking pidgin means imprisoning the black man and perpetuating a conflictual situation where the white man infects the black man with extremely toxic foreign bodies.” In addition to forcefully removing tribes-people from their homeland, Western slavers forcefully removed their agencies of language. A harbor’s dockyard in Africa was filled with the voices of Western and native African tongues, mutually distinct and sequestered. And upon arrival in the West-Indies the enslaved were imposed upon by the ruling empire through both physical and mental indoctrination, aggressively and passively, through a process called ‘seasoning.’ That is, to season a slave is to assimilate them into culture and society of their new circumstances, ensuring their ability to get around the plantation. This seasoning would clearly affect language too as many languages converged upon the plantation, and the seasoned slaves unwittingly developed creole Afro-Jamaican cultures we know today.
English is still the ruling language in Jamaica. English is the standard by which all else is compared and judged because English is the parlance of the imperial forces over the island and the people they filled it with. Since the days of slavery, through hybridization of cultures, classes, and their respective languages, Jamaica’s poor have developed the Jamaican Creole, Patwa. However, through education and exposure to the middle class, Patwa has formed a continuum with Standard English where they inform one another and build upon each other’s lexicon. Consider, then, the Rastafarian perspective rooted in reclaiming and redefining blackness within the African diaspora. This continuum between Patwa and English is obfuscating the roots of these creolized peoples and the Rastafari have developed a solution. Rasta Speech, with a lingual base in Patwa, heightened by its Garveyist awareness, innovates language and designs its own lexicon in an act of social protest.
Dread Talk
Rex M. Nettleford, an early Jamaican scholar on the Rastafarian movement quotes Theodor Adorno to reinforce the resistant Rasta Speech: “Social protest manifests itself in language change. For defiance of society includes defiance of its language.” Jamaican poet and researcher, Velma Pollard, examines Rasta Speech in depth in her book, Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari, where she synthesizes Nettleford’s understanding of Adorno’s ‘protest through language’ as it applies to the Rastafari. Nettleford defends the implied reaction of the Rasta’s impulsive semantic urge simply “to call old social categories by new and fashionable borrowings” and the creation of a body of ‘I-words’ as part of their “small but pointedly relevant lexicon of normative-descriptive word-symbols.”
The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall,
...

And this is a man, look at his smile,
...

There is no body in the house at all.

- Sylvia Plath, Ariel
Bibliography

Rupert, Julian. *The Phantom of the Opera.* Universal Pictures, 1925. DVD.