



Buying Livity: The Commodification of Rastafari

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Buying Livity: The Commodification of Rastafari

A Thesis

Submitted to Harvard Divinity School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Divinity (MDiv)

by

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Buying Livy: The Commodification of Rastafari

Introduction

When oppressive societal structures collide with radical imaginations, new worlds may spring forth in the ensuing cracks and fissures. Across time and space, human beings look toward their own constructions of divinity to turn towards hope, truth, or alternative possibility in the face of opaque struggle and pain. Observably, new religious traditions often emerge in response to particular challenges and traumas which must be contextualized and made into meaning, so those oppressed groups might reimagine modalities of being and living which allow for their flourishing. With regard to religious traditions of the African diaspora in the Americas, turning towards alternative possibilities hallmarks an experience with spiritual technologies as being designed for asserting complex personhood in the face of stark dehumanization, disavowal, violence, and oppression. Rastafari, Obeah, Santería, or Vodoun, to name a few, each represent particular situated counter-knowledges that undermine colonial, white formations of personhood, proper religious expression, and assumptions about the purpose of living a life. The beliefs, practices, material items, and rhetorical worlds these traditions inhabit, construct, and negotiate create important and, for the imperial regimes against which they posture, dangerous sites of resistance, revolution, and counter-meaning.

However, these traditions do not totally cease their enmeshment with the systems of oppression within which they edify by daring to imagine something else. The particular colonial knowledge projects and histories through and against which African diasporic traditions form must factor into analysis of these traditions as they evolve, change, and continue into the present moment. As Dianne Stewart remarked in her seminal text on African heritage religion in Jamaica, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, the meanings of African diasporic traditions are

“polyvalent, that is, simultaneously dissonant and harmonious, contesting any unidimensional interpretations scholars and observers may have given them in the past”.¹ Indeed, as the economic, military, and imperial structures which precipitated African diasporic traditions’ emergences have re-formed and evolved into modern descendent structures, we must pay special attention to how African derived spiritual technologies have equipped each generation with new tools for negotiating their own complex relationship to and against imposed colonial power structures which complicate and contradict religious-traditional lifeways. Always operative, how can analysis of African diasporic traditions contend with the complex nexus of enmeshment practitioners and communities of African diasporic traditions inhabit? Living out radical possibilities while still existing in proximity and enmeshment with prevailing oppressive hegemonies characterizes the lived experiences of African diasporic religious actors, as is evidenced by the lifestyle and espoused theologies of the Rastafari.

The religious tradition of Rastafari provides an important and understudied site for analysis of this enmeshment due to the explicit anti-capitalist and antiracist goals, practices, and beliefs of its movement and people. Historically and today, Rastas rhetorically reject the commodification of human beings and capitalist exploitation of people and their labor.² However, Rastafari exists largely in the Western consciousness *as* the commodified products, material and musical, of the movement. “These products trade on the aesthetics and “spirit” of Rastafarian culture. They “(dis)articulat[e]” the “brand logics” of Rastafarian cultural products by distilling and perverting the ethical principles that lie within the language and material

¹ Stewart, Dianne M. 2004. *Three Eyes for the Journey :African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*. New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 35.

² Deborah A. Thoms, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 203.

presentations of Rastafari culture to profit from its values.”³ Reggae music and red, gold, and green marijuana paraphernalia are found around the world in markets detached from the cultural location(s) of Rastafari and Rastas. Importantly, outsiders are not the only people doing the work of commodifying, marketing, and selling Rastafari. Insiders, practitioners themselves, are deeply invested and engaged with selling Rastafari products and livity within and outside of Jamaica. Even as Rastas shout, “tourism is whoreism”, they create boutique Rasta retreats, sell artwork on the beach, and sometimes make millions in the music industry.⁴ An analysis of this seeming contradiction might conclude that Rastafari has lost sight of its historical focus in anti-capitalism, or perhaps Rastafari has failed in the realization of its radical potentials for alternative possibility. However, what critical possibilities open up when we pay special attention to the ongoing and inextricable enmeshment Rastafari has always had with commodification? Does tracking a Rastafarian history and phenomenology of commodification help us say something useful about the complex nature of African diasporic traditions in relation to ongoing imperial ontologies? In this article, I contend that tracking the historical relationship between commodification and Rastafari provides an important case study in the relationship between African diasporic religious traditions and the imperial systems and logics they form against and through. To accomplish this, I will first track some historical enmeshments of Rastafari with commodification, showing that the tradition has long sought economic stability as a protection against marginalization and state oppression. Then, I will explore the commodification of ganja (marijuana) and how Rastas autonomously engage with the newly legalized ganja trade in

³ Jovan Scott Lewis, “Rights, Indigeneity, and the Market of Rastafari,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 24, no. 1 (2017): 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0940739116000400>.

⁴ Jovan Scott Lewis, “Rights, Indigeneity, and the Market of Rastafari,” 58.

Jamaica. Moving afterward to an analysis of the commodification of reggae music, I will expand upon how the message, theology, and rhetoric of Rastafari is consumed by the globe and what highly commercialized Rasta art says about the Rasta artist's lived theologies. My analysis will conclude by examining a Rastafarian tourist attraction called the Rastafari Indigenous Village which raises important questions about the future of the tradition in light of Jamaica's booming tourist industry at this particular moment of Rastafari's strong cultural relevance and popularity. By creating work such as this, it is my hope that scholars of religion in the African diaspora may become better equipped to acknowledge the multivalent pressures with which African diasporic practitioners contend as they continually negotiate questions of community, personhood, and autonomous flourishing. Critical analysis which can complexly attend to the needs of people to materially survive *and* spiritually flourish are indispensable to filling gaps in the scholarship of vital and understudied traditions such as Rastafari.

Section I: Rastafari Through and Against Commodification

Skankin' Sweet

A Rasta doctor, office worker, and carpenter struggle in the context of their personal and professional lives. Under intense pressure to perform, create wealth, uphold industry standards, and make a living for themselves and their families, these working people are at a breaking point. With mounting bills and rent due, where do they go for respite? What solace and meaning exists within the hustle and grind of the economic realities of their lives? This is the question Chronixx grapples with in his 2016 song "Skankin' Sweet" and its music video. In the first verse of the official video, which has been viewed on youtube approximately 48,000,000 times,⁵ three characters emerge grappling with the effects of living within an economic system that extracts,

⁵ Chronixx, "Skankin' Sweet [Official Video]," July 31, 2018, music video, 4:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=049km3Vc02c>.

disregards, and impoverishes them. They are tired, frustrated, and annoyed. The medical professional delivers a painful report in the waiting room, the secretary shrugs off an uncomfortable advance from her superior, and the carpenter looks out at an empty showroom and workshop. These are the expositional images of life for these characters. However, Chronixx and his song asserts that this is not the total sum of their existence. As the song carries on with such lyrics as, “for every pain, there’s a melody; for every struggle, there’s a harmony”,⁶ the viewer sees the attitude of these workers shift as they end their working days and escape. In painting, dancing, cooking, and family care, the three characters shift their efforts to that which can sustain their living beyond economic means. The troubled secretary takes a drag from a spliff, or joint, and dives into painting a lush and verdant jungle scene. As she paints, the video’s characters, including Chronixx himself, begin to literally enter and transition into a rich jungle scene, dancing or “skankin all their troubles away”.⁷

What does this video assert other than the power of art as an antidote or resistance to capitalism’s malaise? For Chronixx, the supremely popular reggae artist, this piece speaks beyond a general critique of capitalism. This artwork represents explicit Rastafari beliefs that anchor anti-capitalism, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism within a theology of Black beauty, dignity, and full peoplehood. As a religious tradition, Rastafari emerged not quite 100 years ago as a reimagining and prophetic vision of decolonial Black power in the context of longer spiritual, religious, and political histories rooted in Black exploitation and slavery. Emerging after the end of legal slavery in Jamaica and quite near the end of formal colonization by the UK, Dianne Stewart states clearly,

⁶ Chronixx, “Skankin’ Sweet,” 1:29.

⁷ Chronixx, “Skankin’ Sweet,” 3:22.

of all the postemancipation manifestations of African-Jamaican religion, Rastafari is the clearest rearticulation of African religious resistance to enslavement and captivity...Rastafari's political and cultural visions demand direct confrontation with White supremacy and its legacy of anti-Africanness that has crept into African diasporic cultures.⁸

Based in part upon the philosophies of Marcus Garvey and Christian teachings,⁹ Rastafari situates itself in the nexus of colonial and decolonial religious creativity. Denying a formation of Blackness as cursed and nonhuman, Rastas have always staunchly critiqued the conditions of racial capitalism and imperialism which extracted wealth from Black bodies to build white empires. It comes as no surprise that reggae artists, who have long borne the cultural brunt of Rastafari's popular culture, are invested in portraying Rasta theologies, practices, and beliefs concerning issues of commodification and exploitation. However, considering Rastafari and its musical tradition, reggae's, history and relationship to Jamaican culture, global popular culture, and the global freedom struggle, what is to be said of the role commodification has played in this explicitly anti-racist, anti-imperial, and anti-capitalist religious movement? For purposes of this analysis, commodification represents the ongoing process by which certain material and immaterial entities are situated, created, and traded as a unit of capitalist exchange. For example, culturally specific projects might be considered commodified when they become mainly controlled, produced, guarded, or influenced by an explicit desire to sell access to them. Capitalist regimes employ commodification in order to explore avenues of capital accumulation in previously un-commodified sectors such as public services or religious/cultural spheres. This usage of commodification takes for granted the current moment of neoliberal hegemonic capitalism which emerged in the middle of the 20th century; however, historic manifestations of

⁸ Stewart, Dianne M. *Three Eyes for the Journey*. 123.

⁹ Barry Chevannes, "Ships That Will Never Sail: The Paradox of Rastafari Pan-Africanism," *Critical Arts* 25, no. 4 (2011): 565-566, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2011.639995>.

this desire to turn people, things, and actions into products have long factored into the formation and evolution of Rastafari.

By tracking a history of Rastafari and its enmeshment within systems of commodification, to include the current hegemonic economic moment of neoliberalism, we can better contend with the complexity of Rastafari's critique of capitalist exploitation and imperial extraction. Rather than bemoaning the surface level contradictions of Rasta theology and lived experiences with commodification, we can analyze economic realities of commodification, saying something useful about survival and imagination within ongoing oppression and marginalization. What alternatives to this commodification does Rastafari imagine even as it necessarily navigates prevailing economic realities? In essence, we must take seriously the notion that Rastafari only exists because of complex and colliding histories of exploitation, of commodification. The commodification of human beings and their labor on the island of Jamaica predicates the very origins of this tradition, and while the period of chattel slavery has ended, descendent systems continue to uphold economic, social, and political practices which, in an unbroken line, have necessitated the commodification of Black labor and Black aesthetics. Despite this reality, Rasta people and their ancestors, spiritual, biological, and both, have imagined alternative worlds of flourishing, autonomy, love, and divine connection. Is Chronixx's critique and message less sharp because he has been streamed hundreds of millions of times? Are Rastas engaged in the tourist industry in Jamaica less than Rasta for doing so? By taking commodification seriously as a complex nexus of overlapping goals and practices, we might begin to usefully contend with Rastafari as more than a response, beyond resistance. Despite proximity and enmeshment, Rastafari does not center white, colonial assumptions within its own

theology, so analysis of this tradition must contend with the alternatives to western ontological sovereignty which it creates, inhabits, and imagines.

Rasta Roots: Resistance to Commodification

Rastafari as a tradition and global religious community is observably concerned with heritage, genealogy, and history. Although Rastafari as such does not edify into a discrete spiritual, religious, or even political entity until the middle of the 20th century, adherents draw direct lines and parallels to much older groups and longer traditions. In one central belief, Rastas understand themselves as the direct heritage of the ancient Israelites described in the Bible.¹⁰ As the Biblical Hebrews were stolen away from their promised land in the book of Ezra, so too were Africans forcibly taken to a Babylon of their own in the Western Hemisphere during the period of Atlantic slavery. Early Rastafarian Pan-African philosophies looked to ancient narrative traditions as a figurative compass, pointing toward Africa and futures of Black flourishing. Randy Goldson stated in his 2020 article, “Liberating the Mind”, “For the Rastas, the long biblical genealogy of Ethiopia justifies its status as Zion.”¹¹ In the Rasta imagination, the struggle against Babylon takes on religious, economic, and social dimensions, as the capitalist, white supremacist states that govern Rasta communities inhabit a cosmological role as paradigmatic oppressor, thief, and violator. Rasta scholar Charles Price further illustrates this historical and theological consciousness in the words of the late Rasta elder, Rasta Ivey.

I came to see, to know, that we [Black people] have been crucified since we arrived in this land [Jamaica]. ... We [Rastafari] are the ancients here today, to continue the trod of Isaiah, Daniel, Elijah, Jeremiah, Moses, David, Solomon...it is our prophets and warriors

¹⁰ Erin C. MacLeod, *Visions of Zion: Ethiopians and Rastafari in the Search for the Promised Land*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 4.

¹¹ Goldson, Randy R. 2020. “Liberating the Mind: Rastafari and the Theorization of Maroonage as Epistemological (Dis) Engagement.” *Journal of Black Studies* 51 (4): 383.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720908011>.

in this land who come before us and tell the people that iniquity must end, that our people must be free... it is the same Tacky and Cuffy and Nanny and Bogle [who led insurrections for liberation and justice]...and Rasta come take it up.¹²

Importantly, narrations of Rastafari's lineage in oppressed and enslaved groups draws parallels to prevailing stories and historical/mythical narratives available to Jamaicans in the early 20th century. The Bible represents one important source, as has been evidenced. Stories of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt and their sojourn in Babylon are two important religious textual origin stories; however, Rastas also situate themselves within national origins stories conjunctively. As Marcus Garvey's philosophy and political rhetoric encouraged a return to Africa, Jamaicans in the early 20th century witnessed a prophetic event in the Kingdom of Ethiopia. On November 3, 1930 word reached the western hemisphere that,

amid barbaric splendor, and lavish pageantry, the 39-year-old emperor Haile Selassie I, who claims descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and bears the titles Lord King of Kings of Ethiopia, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, The Elect of God, and The Light of the World, was crowned at dawn today.¹³

The crowning of Haile Selassie as a Black king of one of Africa's only independent nations heavily enlivened Black Jamaicans' visions of alternative histories and possible futures during the first third of the 20th century. Haile Selassie was seen as the second coming of the messiah,¹⁴ and the movement bears his princely name, Ras Tafari; however, Rastas do not only narrate their longer histories outside of the Caribbean or Jamaica. As Rasta Ivey said in a previous quotation, Black Jamaican national heroes and heroines were honored from inception as the movement's forefathers and foremothers. Nanny, Tacky, and other maroon figures represent the earliest

¹² Charles Price, *Becoming Rasta : Origins of Rastafari Identity in Jamaica*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

¹³ *New York Times* (1923-), "EMPEROR IS CROWNED IN REGAL SPLendor AT AFRICAN CAPITAL," 1930.

¹⁴ Charles Price, "The Cultural Production of a Black Messiah: Ethiopianism and the Rastafari," *Journal of Africana Religions* 2, no. 3(2014): 419.

Afro-Jamaican resistance fighters. Pushing back against enslavement and the British empire, these figures embody a paradigmatic anti-commodification that Rastafari theologies espouse. Escaped enslaved people, or maroons, represent not only a rejection of the commodification of human beings and their labor but also a rejection of the commodification of non-human actors such as land and plant life; maroon peoples created knowledge lineages that, as written by Randy Goldson in his article, “Liberating the Mind”, “necessitated a commitment to thinking outside of the ideological framework of the plantation”.¹⁵

From the earliest maroon to Rasta youth presently, Jamaica’s land has served as a site of survival, resistance, pain, and prophecy. Importantly, Jamaica’s tropical climate, which closely resembles the conditions in many enslaved Africans’ homelands, served as a continual thread in the liberatory imagination of Black Jamaicans. English soldiers clad in wool uniforms had little experience fighting in the jungle, whereas Akan maroon warriors like Granny Nanny are said to have excelled in these battlegrounds. “Using their knowledge of the rainy forest for traps, camouflage, and ambushes, the Maroons were able to hold their position against a much greater, much better equipped and better supplied British army.”¹⁶ Horticultural practices from Africa were often more effective than those introduced by the European settlers, and African healing practices against tropical diseases were often more effective. For example, Africans had been inoculating for yaws long before western vaccines.¹⁷ Granny Nanny is mythologized as performing miracles in the Jamaican highlands, growing food for an army with a handful of

¹⁵ Goldson, Randy R. 2020. “Liberating the Mind: Rastafari and the Theorization of Maroonage as Epistemological (Dis) Engagement.” *Journal of Black Studies* 51 (4): 370.

¹⁶ Joshua Aikins, “Queen Nanny and Maroon Resistance,” In *International Encyclopedia of Protest and Revolution*, 2009.

¹⁷ Katherine Paugh, “Yaws, Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Circulation of Medical Knowledge in the British Caribbean and the Atlantic World,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 88 no. 2 (2014): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2014.0029>.

pumpkin seeds. Indeed, the ecological realities of Jamaica provided and continue to provide a site of resistance, resilience, and meaning for Black Jamaicans, and this is evident within the practices of Rastafari today. Rasta eco-theology contends with land outside of the colonial paradigm of commoditized plantation property or site of extraction.

In these lauded national myths and narratives which are central to Rasta's formation, we can see the Rasta imagination in conversation with alternative possibilities outside of colonially prescribed histories and formations of Black personhood which situate enslaved people and their descendants as subjects without history, untethered by narrative. Rather than engaging and dying within a system of sugarcane cultivation wherein white planters might profit, early maroon ancestors fought, lived, and died cultivating a relationship with place, land, and non-human ecological entities. Importantly, the rhetorical placement of this Rastafarian historicization within Jamaica serves to highlight that the ecological and climatic realities of Jamaica and the physical geographic realities of this mountainous island in the Caribbean work in tandem to establish Rasta communities' relationships to their place(s) and the literal land(s) upon which they build, grow, live, and die. With this in mind, we can more clearly understand Rastas' present rhetorical moves toward describing their socio-historic location in Jamaica as an *indigenous* Jamaican culture. Deborah Thomas writes in *Exceptional Violence* that,

To position Rastafarians as “indigenous” is thus not only to emphasize their connection to land and their rejection of the technologies and simulacra that provide toxic structure to the modern condition or to focus on the aspects of their lifestyle that are rooted in a relationship to the natural landscape that few Jamaicans currently maintain. It is also to invert the usual hierarchies, to convince people around the world of the superiority of Rastafarians' lifestyle, which emphasizes what Ras K'admawe K'nife, a lecturer at the University of the West Indies, calls “sustainable deep ecology.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Deborah A. Thoms, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 213.

Rastafari's bodily aesthetic culture reflects this situated, Jamaican ecological consciousness in a preference for all things deemed natural: food, hair, appearance, clothing, and art.¹⁹ Thus, Rastas recognize their heritage in movements and people who refused to order their life worlds around the cultivation of profit and commodification and created avenues of community success outside of the plantation (and its logics and ecological realities).

The Birth of Rastafari's Commodities

As Rastafari edified as a discrete religio-political tradition in the 1930's, 40's, 50's, and beyond, careful attention was paid to situating these heritages and histories within the practices of the new faith and lifestyle. Rasta Elder Ras McPherson contends with this historicizing eloquently,

“Rastafari—as such is a Social Cosmology, theological ideology, ideological development and a ongoing process of the re-contextualization of history, that represents a Emancipatory path for ALL “DOWNPRESSED” (oppressed) Peoples of the Earth, from the political and spiritual Caesars of this world.”²⁰

From inception, Rastas have contended with commodification as a source of their suffering as they necessarily navigate practices of commodification for their own survival; one early example of this enmeshment with commodification is the Pinnacle commune of Rasta preacher Leonard Howell. While Rastafari edified out of the political and spiritual communities of “several strains” of Pan-African thought in Jamaica, perhaps no figure was more influential in the creation of a fluidly unified movement than Leonard Percival Howell.²¹ Howell, sometimes called “the first Rasta” is a pivotal figure for understanding Rasta theologies of economic survival and community flourishing, topics which are themselves vital for nuancedly contending

¹⁹ Stewart, Dianne M. *Three Eyes for the Journey*. 123.

²⁰ Bobby Sullivan, *Revolutionary Threads : Rastafari, Social Justice, and Cooperative Economics*, (Brooklyn, New York, USA: Akashic Books, 2018), 17.

²¹ Bobby Sullivan, *Revolutionary Threads*, 39.

with current manifestations of commodification within Rastafari today.²² A Pan-African political activist and preacher, Howell felt divinely compelled to attend to Black people who he saw as abandoned by the British colonial regime. Clinton Hutton states in his book, *Leonard Percival Howell and the Genesis of Rastafari*, “Howell recognized that there were significant social, economic, and political problems facing the African descendents in Jamaica, emerging from the changing social conditions and demographics of the period after the first world war.”²³ His response to these challenges came in the creation of the first physical Rasta commune, or *mansion* to use the Rasta term. This commune would sustain Rasta people through growing food, creating household goods, and selling products for profit in order to support community sustainability and economic stability. Therefore, this commune called Pinnacle was designed with entrepreneurial goals beyond subsistence. However, outside of the commodification paradigm of colonial capitalism, Pinnacle sought to create quality products and opportunities for Black Jamaicans to flourish in their own cultural situatedness and autonomous expressions of community. Artists and workers saw the material fruits of their labors; skilled artists, educators, farmers, and other creators produced goods in keeping with the community’s desire to live in harmony with nature, each other, and their moral imaginations of Black community success. While goods were sold to the broader community, an internal market emerged among Pinnacle residents which honored bartering and kinship as meaningful methods of exchange. Through this web of communal creation and consumption, Pinnacle residents developed a group identity rooted in trust and cooperation.²⁴ So successful was Howell’s model of communal economic

²² Clinton A. Hutton, *Leonard Percival Howell and the Genesis of Rastafari*, (Kingston, Jamaica: University Of West Indies Press, 2015), 56.

²³ Clinton A. Hutton, *Leonard Percival Howell and the Genesis of Rastafari*, 197.

²⁴ Clinton A. Hutton, *Leonard Percival Howell and the Genesis of Rastafari*, 200.

viability that the Jamaican state recognized it as a potential threat to the British imperial, capitalist order. Directly because of his work at Pinnacle, Howell was charged with sedition and imprisoned for two years; between 1940 and 1954 the compound would be raided and robbed several times by the colonial state's police.²⁵ Pinnacle was destroyed in a final raid in 1958, leaving the earliest Rastas scattered and viscerally aware of their group's situatedness in opposition to forms of state sanctioned capitalism and colonially legitimized forms of economically viable activity.

This historical example provides an illuminating case in understanding Rastafari's traditional formation and the ongoing enmeshments the tradition has maintained with commodification. Observably, Rastas have long sought to create viable communities and modalities of communal success within the oppressive structures in which they live, as has been well documented within Deborah Thomas's work, *Exceptional Violence*. Pinnacle provides another such salient history which illustrates how early Rastas attempted a form of entrepreneurial capitalism designed with their own theological, moral imaginations in mind. However, due to state intervention and the colonial state's investment in maintaining a monopoly on economic legitimacy and power, Rastas have struggled to adequately satisfy their goals of economic success as a means of community health. So invested was, and is, racial capitalism in the exploitation, responsabilization, and control of Black bodies that the Jamaican state could not allow a project centered around autonomous Black economic stability and sustainability. A self-sufficient Rasta community was and is dangerous to a hegemonically capitalist episteme that orders itself around race and class. In order to disrupt continued efforts toward Pinnacle-like

²⁵ Clinton A. Hutton, *Leonard Percival Howell and the Genesis of Rastafari*, 198.

communities, the government of Jamaica heavily criminalized Rastafari practices and increased incarceration, surveillance, and violence on Rasta communities for decades.

Since the earliest days of Rastafari's suppression by the Jamaican government, Rastafari has contended with the need to commodify aspects of their religious creativity in order to survive and flourish. At Pinnacle, Rastas made natural products in keeping with early Rastafarian eco-theologies. However, as Jamaica's tourist industry grew and Rastafari entered the popular consciousness of the West through reggae music, the artistic, symbolic material products of the tradition became highly identifiable and lucrative within the cultural, aesthetic market. In mapping out the phenomena of Rastafari's commodification, attention must be paid to which practices, products, themes, and motifs became particularly commodifiable in particular contexts. Then, in conversation with Rasta theologies and beliefs, what stakes become evident for Rastas with this commodification in mind. What is potentially lost? Who stands to gain, and what theological counter-knowledges assert themselves as alternative possibilities?

Section II: Commodifying Livity

Livity

The characters in Skankin' Sweet's music video are portrayed, at the start of the narrative, in states of deep tension with the world around them. Doggedly tired and overwhelmed, they struggle to fulfill their artistic and deep inner passions within the economic realities of their daily lives. However, Chronixx's song doesn't leave it here. This song isn't a lament or a dirge for the poor, suffering worker. As the video progresses, the mood and tone lifts as the workers shift out of their commodified roles into something else. They dance, love,

smoke, and paint in defiance to the “downful vibes”.²⁶ The broadest term to define Rastas’ lifestyle, as shown in this music video, is *livity*. Scholar Jack Johnson-Hill renders the phrase succinctly, “Livity is a Rastafarian term which refers to an independent and integrated lifestyle that is consistent with one’s social and cultural origins”.²⁷ Rasta livity might then be described as simply the manner in which Rastas make daily choices and actions based on their theological and cosmological beliefs which center around historically situated formations of selfhood with regard to Africa and the African diaspora. However, livity is not merely a synonym for *belief* in the Western sense. Rasta livity is a form of being and relationality that exists within the nexus of individual human bodies, divinity, community, and the natural world. Livity does not merely describe what you believe; livity describes who you are in relation to the world(s) around you. Importantly, paradigmatic livity for Rasta peoples is not only tangentially or loosely tied to decolonial and anti-imperial ways of being. Rasta scholar Shamara Alhassan renders livity as the defining system for Rasta peoples’ engagements with radical imagination and praxis.

Livity guides the daily practice of decolonization that Rastafari undertake to free themselves from colonial and white supremacist anti-Black racism and center Pan-African liberation. When a person chooses to trod the path of Rastafari, she takes a non-normative path, particularly in environments where neocolonialism and white supremacist indebtedness to Eurocentrism are still the dominant purview.²⁸

Livity is a departure from European standards of beauty, properness, and social acceptability in favor of honoring, restoring, and renegotiating African derived ways of being. However, the very countersignalling against white, Western normative values that livity represents observably

²⁶ Chronixx, “Skankin’ Sweet,” 0:56-1:01.

²⁷ Jack Johnson-Hill, *I-Sight : the World of Rastafari: An Interpretive Sociological Account of Rastafarian Ethics*, ATLA Monograph Series, no. 35 ([Evanston, Ill.]: Metuchen, N.J: American Theological Library Association; Scarecrow Press, 1995), 201.

²⁸ Shamara Wyllie Alhassan, ““We Stand for Black Livity!”: Trodding the Path of Rastafari in Ghana,” *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020): 374, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070374>.

becomes commodified within prevailing neoliberal artistic and cultural markets. Including and beyond the cultural appropriation of dreadlocks or Afrocentric dress, what does it mean for Rastafari that their practices and symbols, designed to undermine Babylon, are deeply enmeshed in market ideologies of commodification which uphold and reify the Western, white-supremacist imagination? Through analyzing particular Rastafarian practices, materials, and productions in light of their commodification, we can see how Rastas are simultaneously dispossessed of their religious creative autonomy and further economically invested into the success of said products and efforts within the market. Furthermore, by critically engaging with Rastas' insider involvement within these markets, we can more wholly describe the role of the religious tradition as a vehicle for survival, meaning, and alternative possibility.

An Herb for the Healing of the Nations

One especially emblematic practice that represents this nexus is the smoking of ganja, the Rastafarian sacred herb. Ganja, or marijuana, smoking as a ritual practice within Rastafari emerged as a syncretization between Rastafari, Hindu, and Christian practices during the early 20th century, and the smoking of ganja from pipes called *chalices* is an integral practice of Rasta religious gatherings called *reasonings*.²⁹ Reasonings involve the smoking of ganja as a pathway to heightened consciousness, where the role of the plant is intentionally considered. It is not merely a tool or substance that affects the mind, it is considered a partner to humanity, a gift from Jah (God) and a vital partner in escaping the mental slavery imposed by colonial projects and power structures.³⁰ The plant is honored holistically, and not considered only in light of the

²⁹ Anna Waldstein, "Smoking as Communication in Rastafari: Reasonings with 'Professional' Smokers and 'Plant Teachers'," *Ethnos* 85, no.5 (2020): 905, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1627385>.

³⁰ Anna Waldstein, "Smoking as Communication in Rastafari," 901.

bud that produces the smokeable and highly commoditized material. The role and status of ganja might best be summed up by Chronixx in the spoken prelude to his song “Perfect Tree”.

Universal, acceptance of your plant
 We no deal with partial acceptance of Rastafari
 And that is what Babylon a commit now
 Dem waan (they want to) accept parts of the plant
 And you don't do that
 Becah, you know, you don't accept part of the mango tree
 You have the whole mango tree growing in your yard
 All when the mango nah bear (fruit) 'pon it, you have the tree
 See, so you nah go jus' say alright
 Gimme the mango and cut down the tree
 And then, if we see how it no other part of the tree, it wrong
 No, love the plant, love herb
 You hear dun I say
 Dem coming (making) medicine ah (from) marijuana
 Fi (to) single out parts and aspects of the plant
 That dem want to use
 And that is all, that order of economical origins
 Which means a man now seh (says)
 This part of the plant can make money for me
 The rest I cyaan mek (can't make) money from
 So the rest it bad - no
 All of the plant good brethren, all down to the root³¹

In light of this holistic acceptance and great importance of marijuana for lived Rastafari, Rasta exegesis of The King James Bible, a favorite translation for the tradition,³² often highlights such scriptures as Psalms 104:14 as scriptural support for ganja's importance; “He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth...”³³ In Chronixx's “Skankin' Sweet” music video, the receptionist character is shown explicitly marking a transition between her commodified self and her religious creative self

³¹ Chronixx, “Perfect Tree [Official Video],” March 9, 2016, music video, 0:01-1:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ako5ME3337Y>.

³² Coltri, Marzia, “Postcolonial Interpretation: The Bible in Rastafari,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 18, no. 3 (2020): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2020.1840828>.

³³ Ps. 104:14 KJV

through the smoking of a ganja joint.³⁴ This plant provides a doorway for her own creativity, and ganja works as a partner in her rejection of the material conditions which oppress her. Through communication with this plant, given by Jah as a healing of the nations, she and the other characters enter a state of alternative possibility. The video shows them outside of their typical context of work or even their homes; through ganja, they enter the lush rainforest and dance without ceasing. This song holds that, for Rastas, ganja is more than a recreational substance. It is a tool for communicating with divinity and totally necessary for the realization of livity and lived Rasta theologies. In her 2020 article, “Smoking as Communication in Rastafari”, Anna Waldenstein elucidates with brevity Rastafari’s internally complex and diverse understanding of ganja as a gateway, tool, or agential being;

For some, intuitions are understood to come from the ‘higher Self’, which herbs is seen to facilitate communication with. For others, smoking herbs is thought to open communicative channels between the smoker and the spirit of Haile Selassie I and/or Jah. There are also many Rastafari smokers who identify herbs directly as the source of insight.³⁵

While the particular source of the knowledge, wisdom, and joy that comes about from using ganja is not universally agreed upon within Rastafari, all sects value the herb as an integral part of Rasta livity. However, despite (and precisely because of) the significance of ganja for Rastas, the use and cultivation of this plant has historically given excuse to Jamaica’s government to surveil, incarcerate, and attack Rasta communities. From the very beginnings of Rastafari as such, Rastas and their “drug” were blamed for social unrest and political disharmony on the island. Randy Goldson stated in his 2020 article, “Ganja Struggles”, “The persecution of Rastas intensified after 1938 labor riots because the colonial class blamed the Rastas and their

³⁴ Chronixx, “Skankin’ Sweet,” 2:33.

³⁵ Anna Waldstein, “Smoking as Communication in Rastafari: Reasonings with 'Professional' Smokers and 'Plant Teachers',” *Ethnos* 85, no.5 (2020): 901.

promotion of ganja smoking for the indolence of the workers, which caused them to riot”.³⁶

Before Rastafari was even a decade old, a strong association between Rastas, unsavory behavior, and ganja was established in the Jamaican popular consciousness. Utilizing this idea of ascribing lawlessness to ganja users provided the excuse for Jamaica’s government to raid Pinnacle, Rastafari’s first countryside commune, in 1941.³⁷ After this first raid on the community of Rastafari founder Leonard Howell, Jamaican officials consistently terrorized, surveilled, incarcerated, and harassed Rastas on the basis of their connection to their holy herb.

In 2015, the Jamaican Parliament amended the Dangerous Drug Act, effectively decriminalizing ganja for personal and religious use.³⁸ Importantly, Rastas were explicitly legislated in this ruling as conditionally exempt from the weight limit of ganja allowed on one’s person and the amount of ganja one may cultivate for personal use, assuming all ganja in question is utilized for religious purposes.³⁹ By easing restrictions on ganja, the Jamaican state is better situated to regulate and profit from the commodification of ganja, and by explicitly coding Rastafari into the legal language of the amendment, the state retains a monopoly on even the definition of Rastafari and religion.⁴⁰ This is to say that government officials, police, judges, etc., are the official arbiters of what “religious purposes” or even a “Rastafarian” is. Whereas prior to legalization, Rastas cultivated, consumed, and sold marijuana on the robust but unofficial market, a newly attuned Jamaican government is presently concerned with enforcing and

³⁶ Randy R. Goldson, “Ganja Struggles: Rastafari and the Contestation for Cannabis Rights in Jamaica,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55, no. 4 (2020): 574, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2020.0046>.

³⁷ Randy R. Goldson, “Ganja Struggles,” 575.

³⁸ Randy R. Goldson, “Ganja Struggles,” 583.

³⁹ Steven Davenport and Bryce Pardo, “The Dangerous Drugs Act Amendment in Jamaica: Reviewing Goals, Implementation, and Challenges,” *The International Journal of Drug Policy* 37 (2016): 60–69, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.08.007>.

⁴⁰ Randy R. Goldson, “Ganja Struggles,” 584.

regulating new official, and expensive, licenses and other regulatory practices. Most working class Jamaicans can't afford basic government cultivation licenses which cost well over \$3000 USD; these highly regulated licenses are especially prohibitive for Rastas considering their own economic marginalization.⁴¹ Despite the disenfranchisement of most Rastas people, a small subset of Rasta entrepreneurs have emerged to take advantage of the state sanctioned ganja market. One such Rasta is Ras Iyah V, who founded a festival called "Rastafari Rootzfest". This three day conference is designed as a way for Rasta and non-Rasta ganja cultivators and growers to promote best practices for medical, sacramental, and recreational marijuana growth, marketing, and consumption.⁴² In a 2017 interview, Ras Iyah V stated his hopes for a Rastafarian centered ganja industry which might attend to the latest science and the religious beliefs of practitioners.

We're very thankful to our partners for their commitment and efforts in bringing science and technology to our event, and to Jamaica. With science by our side, we can learn more about what we have, and we can explore ways of helping our people and farmers benefit from the mighty herb.⁴³

The syncretization between the legitimizing power of science and large entrepreneurial events with the radical theologies of Rastafari's "mighty herb" highlights Ras Iyah V's determination to make Rasta livity legible for the market. However, I argue that Ras Iyah V's engagement with commodification as a mechanism for flourishing should not be interpreted as selling out or rejecting Rastafari's investments with anti-oppression. Iyah V recognizes that the state-sanctioned ganja market has strong potential for creating Rastafarian community stability; however, he has not foreclosed her own Rastafarian critique of Babylon's continued

⁴¹ Randy R. Goldson, "Ganja Struggles," 585.

⁴² PR Newswire, "Steep Hill & University of Technology, Jamaica Champion Cannabis Testing at Rastafari RootzFest in Jamaica on December 15-17, 2017," 2017.

⁴³ PR Newswire, "Jamaica Champion Cannabis Testing," 2017.

marginalization and oppression of Rasta people within this market. In a statement for the Global Drug Policy Index, Ras Iyah V states,

At the moment, yes, we have an industry. But it is only the privileged few, very few people, including those who used to fight against ganja, who are now in the position to benefit out of this industry. Rastafarians and other grassroot traditional farmers are in dialogue with the government to change that. Hoping that changes are meaningful and made as quickly as possible. If not, Rastafarians and grassroots people will take to the streets. Because, usually, there's no other method that the government recognises. Peaceful letters have been written. Demonstrations have been made. A lot of dialogue has taken place. But the ganja industry remains in the hands of the rich people; without those who have suffered being able to benefit. Looking forward to more agitation, organisation, mobilisation, in order to change the situation as it is now. Into what the situation is supposed to be.⁴⁴

In this statement, Ras Iyah V articulates a strong opposition to the present conditions of the industry in which he is enmeshed. His involvement in the state's commodification of ganja has not stifled his ability to critique and analyze how this system does harm to Rasta people. If anything, his intimate knowledge of this iteration of state-sanctioned commodification sharpens his ability to decisively name the problems that continue to plague Babylon's relationship to Rastafari vis a vis ganja.

Of course, not all Rastas can or will directly ideologically or economically support the legitimized ganja market in Jamaica. Strong opposition to the government's regulation of the market stems from the historical relationship between Rastas, the state, police, and the ganja trade. "Rastas argue that it is not only ironic but contradictory that the people who suffered the most for using marijuana stand to lose out most significantly from its decriminalization and commercialization".⁴⁵ As such, many Rastas continue to engage in the unofficial, illegal trade out

⁴⁴"The Ganja Industry Remains in the Hands of the Rich People - Ras-Iyah V's Story," *The Global Drugs Policy Index*, January 7, 2022, <https://globaldrugpolicyindex.net/stories/the-ganja-industry-remains-in-the-hands-of-the-rich-people-ras-iyahs-story/>.

⁴⁵ Randy R. Goldson. "Ganja Struggles"; 591.

of necessity as well as out of a rejection and resistance to the state's own assertion of its hegemony and monopoly on legitimacy. In this case, current Rastas may seem to remain in closer proximity to their historical movement and its adversarial posture against colonial domination. Similarly to Howell's Pinnacle commune, this internal, unregulated ganja trade centers a type of commodification by Black Rastas for Black Rastas. However, as with Pinnacle, the state's opposition to such projects leave those participating within this market vulnerable to violence and further marginalization. Observably, both within and outside of the state's legitimized commodification of ganja, Rastas continue to grapple with what it means to autonomously thrive theologically within a market system that contradicts the tenets of livity.

Reggae: The Sound of a Movement

Along with ganja, reggae music is certainly among Rastafari's most potent symbols and, perhaps, the most commodified. To help shed light on Rastafarian commodification and exportation, one must track how reggae music, which emerged as the liturgical sound of a subversive faith tradition, became the commercialized and heavily exported official musical sound of the state of Jamaica. Emerging from a blend of Jamaican folk music, jazz, ska, and other popular genres,⁴⁶ Reggae represented the sound of protest, peace, and Black love in the earliest forms. Stephen King stated this succinctly in his 2002 book, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*; "Reggae's influence and popularity both within and outside of Jamaica reflects its 'third world' origins. In particular, reggae's roots are embedded in the historical conditions of Jamaican slavery and colonialism".⁴⁷ What is often referred to as Roots

⁴⁶ Erna Brodber, "The Emergence of Reggae: a 1986 Overview," *Jamaican Historical Review* 20, no. 20 (1998).

⁴⁷ Stephen A. King, Barry T. Bays, and P. Renée Foster, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 23.

Reggae encapsulated a religious movement determined to reject oppression and manifest better worlds to come, a return to Zion and the fall of Babylon and its wickedness. As Jamaican music evolved in the period following independence from The United Kingdom, chronic underemployment, government corruption, and a rise in crime and poverty spurred the tone of the national sound to turn increasingly polemic and revolutionary. Importantly, this new sound was radically Black centered and celebratory of Black futures and flourishing. Erna Brodber, a Jamaican author writes in her book *Black Consciousness* “We were glad to hear this new sound. It relaxed us. We took off our makeup, we washed our hair and left it natural. We took off our jackets and ties..”.⁴⁸ By the 1970’s reggae music was gaining a foothold as the cultural voice of Black self love and Black centered resistances to white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalist oppressions.

While Jamaica has been historically majority Black since the earliest days of colonialism, colonial and postcolonial governments have largely (and unsurprisingly) reflected and represented the interests of Jamaica’s small but influential white upper and middle class. As the sound of dissent to this elite rule, reggae was severely restricted in its early days. Concerts and radio time were largely banned, and reggae artists and other Rastas generally were portrayed in national media as lazy, dirty, and inciters of violence. King writes that, “Stations, when they did play indigenous (Jamaican) music, promoted ska musicians who played safe, non-political songs”.⁴⁹ Rastas were even explicitly responsabilized as the causes of the nation’s social and political strife when their songs were intensely scorned for highlighting unfavorable conditions

⁴⁸ Erna Brodber, “Black Consciousness and Popular Music in Jamaica in the 1960s and 1970s,” *New West Indian Guide* 61, no. 3-4 (1987): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1163/13822373-90002049>.

⁴⁹ Stephen A. King et al, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*. 73.

on the island that might deter tourists.⁵⁰ However, the history of reggae's co-opting, commodification, and appropriation marks that politicians soon realized that despite attempts at controlling and subverting the messages of reggae, the genre had taken root in the minds of the population at large. As is recorded in Stephen King's book, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*, in the 1970's Prime Minister Michael Manley pioneered the integration of reggae music in his political campaigns and rallies much to his political betterment.⁵¹ Drawing upon this precedent, the Jamaican government continues to capitalize upon reggae music as a source of capital, cultural capital, and social clout globally. During and following the life of Bob Marley, the Jamaican state in conjunction with the tourist industry made attempts to establish reggae as the official and authentic music of the island in order to garner more attention as a travel destination. In general, this is the hallmark of Jamaica's ongoing relationship with Rastafari. By promoting an external image of Rastafari in the friendly, artistic, and gentle Rastaman, Jamaica has capitalized on a movement which was designed as an alternative to the oppressive conditions that the government created for poor, Black Jamaicans. In keeping with more general neoliberal thought, this is unsurprising as neoliberalism's project hinges upon the commodification of cultural projects. Economist and seminal scholar of neoliberalism David Harvey stated succinctly, "The commodification (through tourism) of cultural forms, histories, and intellectual creativity entails wholesale dispossessions (the music industry is notorious for the appropriation and exploitation of grassroots culture and creativity)".⁵² As neoliberal logics and moralities assert that everything should result in economic viability, profit, and wealth, the

⁵⁰ Stephen A. King et al, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*. 123.

⁵¹ Stephen A. King et al, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*. 14.

⁵² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 204.

economic success of reggae music around the world resulted in the general and pervasive commodification of all associated Rasta aesthetics. The products that Rastas created became synonymous with the word and movement of Rastafari itself. Tourist promotions for economic development centered Rasta artworks, literary works, songs, and other goods as the authentic cultural products of Jamaica.⁵³ Obscuring the central pain, anger, and discontent of much Rasta art, the Jamaican government has been a main proponent of Rastafarian culture in terms of artistic tropes of carefree happiness while notably *not* materially meeting many of the issues the movement seeks to address.

Moreover, the state is not the only entity invested in the commodification of a version of Rastafari mediated by reggae music. Reggae artists and the labels that represent and produce their music are also inherently invested and enmeshed in commodifying livity and presenting a particular Rasta aesthetic to Rasta communities, but more often, outsider groups. Referring again to Chronixx's "Skankin' Sweet", some reggae becomes incredibly popular in communities well outside of Jamaican Rastafari, African diasporic religious circles, and even the Caribbean or African diaspora itself. Chronixx's albums have been listened to millions of times. He has headlined countless concerts and venues around the world, appeared on popular late night talk show, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, and has appeared on National Public Radio's (NPR) wildly popular "Tiny Desk Concert" series. By any metric, Chronixx is a successful recording artist. He is also both implicitly artistically and explicitly confessionally a staunch believer and subscriber to Rastafari and its livity. For Chronixx, the creation of reggae music is not in any way discrete from his embodied experience with the spiritual dimensions of Rastafari.

⁵³ Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence :Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 219.

“Music is a part of your livity. Livity is not a part of your music. We don’t live as part of our music. Our music is a part of our living”, he stated in a 2017 interview with Fader Magazine.⁵⁴ With this remark, Chronixx spoke to the inseparability of his music and his identity and lived practices as a Rastaman. Although mediated by commodification, his songs reach millions and espouse core tenets of the tradition which include sharp critiques of commodification. As is evidenced by his music video for “Skankin’ Sweet”, reggae artists like Chronixx speak to the particular experiences of Rastafari while remaining artistically intelligible to wider audiences. One need not understand exactly what Chronixx means by contextually Rasta words like “chalice” or even “skankin’” to resonate with the meaning of this piece. In the most general sense, this is of course the reason for reggae’s wide-reaching global success since the days of Bob Marley. Reggae speaks to Rastas and by extension other groups who might identify with the tradition in terms of class, race, or artistic or aesthetic preference. So from the perspective of Rastafari, does reggae or the Rastas who produce it lose something in the commodification? Of course, the radical messages of commercialized music can be easily curtailed by governmental media regulation, corporate boards, producers, and preferences of the market. This is observably true in the historic cases of reggae music’s ban from Jamaica’s radio in the mid 20th century. However, I argue that most reggae music and most reggae artists are able to maintain their organic Rastafarian themes precisely because this is what the market demands. Without the countercultural aesthetics of Rastafarian music and its adjacent products like clothing, vinyl and CD’s, and concert experiences, the genre of reggae loses the distinct significations, both for insiders and outsiders, that makes it appealing for consumption. By listening to reggae and

⁵⁴ Ross Kenneth Urken, “What Rasta Taught Chronixx,” *The FADER* (November 10, 2017), <https://www.thefader.com/2017/03/06/what-rasta-taught-chronixx>.

understanding its message in context, consumers not only engage with art, but with its broader movements rooted in social subversion, decolonial thought, and anti-racism. The current moment of neoliberal capitalism demands that everything produces wealth somehow. Even subversions must be marketed and sold back to those who situate themselves in opposition to neoliberal beliefs and projects. While this gestural subversion allows self-aware anti-capitalists to consume anti-capitalist products with less cognitive or moral dissonance, what does this say about those who produce these radical signifiers?⁵⁵ I argue that mainstream reggae artists, while certainly engaging with commodification, still create art and imagine alternative possibilities in keeping with the longer traditions and theological assertions of Rastafari. By posturing commercialized reggae as a cheapened or bastardized version of Rasta knowledge production, we would necessarily essentialize and thereby distort and misrepresent the nature of this tradition which has always been deeply enmeshed in commodification, capitalism, and the complex nexus of imperial oppression. As scholar of Rastafari, Deborah Thomas stated succinctly in her analysis of Rastafari engagement with the tourist industry,

But this kind of knee-jerk cynicism is too easy, particularly if we keep in mind that Rastafarians' principles regarding economic development have always been to capitalize on what is available, oriented toward community, and locally occurring.⁵⁶

For reggae artists, the commodification of their music does not mean they have foreclosed their radical imaginations concerning racial capitalism, neo-colonialism, or white supremacy, and to analyze the profitability of reggae music as a dissonance with Rasta theology paints an uncomplex picture of Rastafari's relationship with this modality of exchange. While Rastafari is deeply engaged with anticolonialism and its supporting systems, which include

⁵⁵ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism : Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2009), 122.

⁵⁶ Deborah A. Thomas. *Exceptional Violence*. 217.

commodification as a tool of racial capitalism, it is salient to keep Rastafari's commitments to certain Afro-centric forms of imperialism and commodification foregrounded. Evidence of these commitments is also evidenced in popular reggae music. In his 2018 hit song, "No Guarantee" reggae artist Protoje remarks, "So you say me no Ras? Cause I drive in a Benz? Like I never seen Selassie in a couple of them."⁵⁷ In this verse, Protoje engages an important reggae aesthetic which centers around the majesty, royalty, wealth, and imperial might of Rastafari's messiah, His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I. Protoje is one clear, emblematic example of a mainstream reggae artist, highly regarded among Rastafari, who employs this aesthetic and rhetorical theme in many of his pieces. Standing before several Mercedes Benz sport utility vehicles, clad in flashy Western streetwear and gold chains, Protoje begins the music video of his song "Like Royalty", "If I ever make it in life, we gonna be livin' like royalty."⁵⁸ Juxtaposing lush, verdant forest scenes with typical markers of wealth: gold chains, beautiful dancing entourage, and spotless designer clothes, Protoje speaks to wealth as a mechanism for building stability for his family and community. Importantly, the song states "we gonna be living like royalty"⁵⁹; this focus on group success and an ethical attunement towards visions of collective mobility is certainly in keeping with longer Rastafarian traditions all the way back to Leonard Howell's Pinnacle and beyond. It is notable also that, as in many reggae music videos, the scene upon which the video's characters celebrate, dance, and sing is the island of Jamaica itself. The jungle, beaches, and land is the site of this realization of joy, freedom, and Rastafarian livity made possible by artistic and commercial success. Protoje's successful commodification of reggae

⁵⁷Protoje, "No Guarantee [Official Video]," August, 9 2018, music video, 2:28-2:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahQ1TGikQdc>.

⁵⁸Protoje, "Like Royalty [Official Video]," August, 6 2020, music video, 0:11-0:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFxyPB_LcBA.

⁵⁹Protoje, "Like Royalty [Official Video]," 0:11-0:17.

music means that not only has the message of Rastafari reached millions, but reggae artists like him are ostensibly more able to effectively realize their theologies of community care in an organic Rastafarian context. In this way, commercialized and commodified reggae is posited within reggae songs themselves as a legitimate form of Rastafarian activity. In fact the Rastafarian work ethic is perhaps most visible within this heavily commodified reggae, “Count me blessings, then reaping the reward, make me first mil’ remember when me used to starve, pull up Irish town Benz inna garage.”⁶⁰ Protoje acknowledges here that his faith and tenacity have brought him out of unlivable poverty and into prosperity. In this one song alone, which is importantly itself a commodified product of the Rastafarian tradition, one can clearly see the complex enmeshment between Rastafari and commodification. Rastas have long sought forms of economic community success which could align with their religious and cultural goals of Black beauty, power, and freedom. Reggae music represents a way in which a totally Rastafarian cultural form can provide physical resources and organic artistic fulfillment within Rasta contexts. With this in mind, we might start to more nuancedly content with the complex relationship between Rastafari and commodification at large.

The Rastafari Indigenous Village

As Chronixx has postured, there is no clear separation between Rastafari’s artistic or cultural production and living out a Rasta livity. Take for instance the Jamaican tourist attraction “The Rastafari Indigenous Village” as described by scholar Jovan Lewis in his article, “Rights, Indigeneity, and the Market of Rastafari”.

The Rastafari Indigenous Village (RIV) is a Rastafari-themed educational and cultural tour founded in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 2008, by members of a local socially conscious Rastafarian arts group, the Indigenous Initiating Circle of Nature (IION). The

⁶⁰Protoje, “Like Royalty [Official Video],” 1:55-2:01.

Rastafari of IION, according to a key RIV member, Arlene, are a “social family network united by their shared concerns over the slow responses of the Rastafari movement to rapid socioeconomic changes taking place within Jamaican society.” They articulate their concerns through their talents as artisans, poets, musicians, craftspersons, designers, and as a fusion Reggae-Nyabinghi music group. Nyabinghi music is traditional Rastafari drumming, named after one of the oldest Rastafari denominations, played during religious services and rituals. As a network, the IION share aspirations to raise positive awareness, to increase education in their communities, and to create economic opportunities through collective and cooperative development.⁶¹

Essentially, this community was designed by Rastas as a way of making necessary income and promoting aspects of their religious culture that tourists may wish to consume in a socially responsible way. The idea of commodification and consumption is significant as according to Lawrence Bamikole in his 2017 article “Livivity as a Dimension of Identity in Rastafari”, “the first element in the notion of livivity is food. Rastafari advises that the consumption of natural food is preferable to consumption of food that has been artificially processed. It also involves the use of *ganja* as a substance for ritual purposes, just as the Holy Communion is used as a symbol of unity in modern churches”.⁶² Lewis describes that the Rasta groups responsible for building the explicitly commoditized village were initially hesitant to admit the developmental potential of cultural tourism, and they felt uneasy at the notion of the consumption of physical Rasta materials as well as ideologies. Lewis stated, “The tourist industry is often viewed extremely negatively, with many Rastafari members of the group remarking that “tourism is ‘whore-ism.’”⁶³ This sentiment drew on the Rastafari ideology’s strong aversion to all things “Babylonian” which highlights Rastas’ continued consciousness of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism even as they have been forced to interact with neoliberal pressures. However, a desire to more wholly portray

⁶¹ Jovan Scott Lewis, “Rights, Indigeneity, and the Market of Rastafari,” 54.

⁶² Bamikole, Lawrence O. 2017. “Livivity as a Dimension of Identity in Rastafari Thought.” *Caribbean Quarterly* 63 (4): 456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2017.1392173>.

⁶³ Jovan Scott Lewis, “Rights, Indigeneity, and the Market of Rastafari,” 53.

Rasta culture on their own terms coupled with the implicit knowledge that other non-Rastas would capitalize on their culture anyway led to the permanent creation of this village designed and run by Rastas.

An overwhelming majority of travelers to the 3 acre village are white tourists from The USA or Europe. Crossing a cool stream onto a picturesque dirt path, they are greeted with a tour of the agricultural and cultural products of traditional Rasta livity. Consumables such as food and textiles are available for purchase along the entirety of the tour route which culminates at a museum and gift shop.⁶⁴ The Rastas who staff the RIV engage with tourism as a means of making income from cultural activities which are germane to their own perceptions of the world and their place within it; however, the need to compete with other tourist attractions pressures the RIV to assert their claims of indigenous authenticity and spiritual relevance in commercially recognizable ways. For example, many highly commodified and marketable spiritual symbols and practices from around the world populate the RIV website. The Ancient Egyptian symbol of the ankh (☥) on the actual welcome sign marks the Afro-centricity of Rasta culture while the highly recognizable spiritual exercise practice of yoga is featured as a daily activity on the home page's promotional video. In this short clip, an ever-smiling, handsome, gray-dreaded Rastaman states that each Rasta and member of the RIV community is "an owner unto themselves based on their capability" as the video shuffles to different artisans and workers.⁶⁵ This neoliberal supposition that equality in the Rastafari imagination originates from each person's own ability to create something marketable is striking when analyzed in connection with the commercial project of the RIV itself. The video concludes with the proclamation that this project brings

⁶⁴ Jovan Scott Lewis, "Rights, Indigeneity, and the Market of Rastafari," 55.

⁶⁵ MyJamaicaJTB. *YouTube*, YouTube, 6 Sept. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUcnwhjzLL8&t=72s.0:18-0:25>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2023.

awareness to Rastafari via tourism. Rastafari “calls us all to become members of a new race, the human race”.⁶⁶ This intentionally marketed palatability may not seem to speak to the explicit anti-capitalist, anti-imperial, or anti-racist theologies at the heart of the tradition; however, what is one to make of this standard marketing practice given the reality of bleak economic realities for Rasta people on the island?

The commodification of Rastafarian imagery, practices, themes, and aesthetics within the RIV may, at first, seem to speak to the ecological imagination of neoliberal commodification. Within the logics of neoliberalism, the natural world serves primarily as a site of resource extraction and profit wherein nonhuman (and human) entities are considered only as important as they are useful to projects of wealth accumulation and free trade. Intertwined, overlapping, and enmeshed ecological webs are neatly divided and reordered to prime them for consumption. In her 2013 analysis of tourism, ecology, and neoliberalism, political scientist Rosaleen Duffy remarked that this ecological compartmentalization, “allows nature to be ‘flattened and deadened’ in to abstract objects, primed for commodity capture to create economic value...Furthermore, it allows neoliberalism to turn the environmental crises it has created into new commodities, as sources of accumulation”.⁶⁷ Neoliberalism’s synthesis of the non-human world informs an ideological position that the use of land is only morally defensible given that humans are using said land for commercial enterprises. Land used for the healing of Black bodies and the nourishment of Black peoples’ spirituality is not inherently congruent with neoliberal goals of never ending growth, economization, and commodification; however, a

⁶⁶ MyJamaicaJTB. *YouTube*, YouTube, 6 Sept. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUcnwhjzLL8&t=72s.01:01-01:05>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2023.

⁶⁷ Duffy, Rosaleen. 2014. “Interactive Elephants: Nature, Tourism and Neoliberalism.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 44: 90. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2013.09.003>.

tourist park for selling art and cultural experiences is highly congruent with those ideals.

Neoliberal moralities of personal freedom also inform a perception of success as only congruent with personal success in projects of commodification. Thus, the RIV presents a morally cogent rendering of Rastafari to tourists and the Jamaican government itself. Rastas in the village are legible as savvy and industrious, and they fit neatly within logics and moralities that relegate radical ecological spiritual engagement to the margins. Radical ecological engagements, in this case, refers to human interactions with the natural world that decenter coloniality and affirm the relationship between humans and the ecological settings in which they live. However, while the tourist industry, which fuels the RIV as a commercial enterprise, might not recognize or promote radical Rasta ecological imaginaries, does this mean the Rastas, who comprise the RIV, have lost sight of this tenet of their traditional theology and cultural knowledge lineage?

I argue that Rastas' enmeshment with commodification at the RIV does not necessitate theological foreclosure of their eco-spiritual imaginations. The Black radical tradition within Jamaica, descending from the first maroons, engages in an ecological imaginary that understands the island of Jamaica itself as a sanctuary and site of liberation. In the plainest, starkest terms, this juxtaposition between commodification and Rastafari's vision of livity foregrounds the catastrophic and complex clash between the nature of neoliberal logics and moralities and Rasta theologies. However, the need to engage within oppressive systems to survive does not necessitate an imaginative foreclosure. Rasta people commodify aspects of their tradition to make money. However, they certainly exercise agency in how they choose to do so, and one can see this conscious decision making in Rasta art, rhetoric, and lifeways which are all present at the RIV. It is important to note that the commodification of Rastafari manifests as a symptom of

ongoing colonialism, white supremacy, and pressures from unsympathetic governments. Rastas commodify as a necessary reaction to the pressures of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism; however, the movement has maintained a consciousness rooted in communal care, the sharing of resources, and the evils of white supremacy and ongoing colonialism, which we can observe in the movement's most popular rhetorical vehicle, reggae. Put another way, Rastas are still imagining new worlds while catastrophic realities attempt to dominate and foreclose futures of Black autonomous flourishing. This affirmation must not be taken for granted. Rastafari maintaining its liberation imagination represents stark defiance to neoliberal commodification logics even as Rastas necessarily engage in the commodification of their material and artistic cultures.

The name of the Rastafari Indigenous Village raises further important questions concerning how Rastas engage with the commodification of their tradition. In particular, what does the village's claim on indigeneity mean for the community and its goals? In order to answer this question and elucidate the significance of this rhetorical choice for analyzing the commodification of Rastafari, one must first track the developing trends of so-called heritage tourism in Jamaica in general. University of the West Indies archivist John Aarons stated succinctly:

The Government of Jamaica, like governments in other countries, has been promoting Heritage Tourism as many visitors desire more than the traditional 'sun, sea and sand'. The Government says that this is in keeping with its policy of developing 'the country's heritage sites and marketing Jamaica's rich cultural traditions'. These sites include buildings which are reported to have significant architectural value and in promoting them, emphasis is placed on their age, former use and attractiveness.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Aarons, John A. 2020. "The Colonial Past and Heritage Tourism: a Jamaican Dilemma." *Round Table (London)* 109 (5): 624–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2020.1820215>.

As heritage tourism grows as a leading source of revenue within global travel markets, state governments invest more efforts into marketing and commodifying particular situated histories as part of the national brand.⁶⁹ In Jamaica, efforts have been made to increase the visibility and destination attractiveness of many settler colonial sites, sites that are lauded as beautiful and aesthetically legible within western architectural and design traditions. Beautiful Georgian style mansions, posh English gardens, and the imposing forts of the island offer heritage tourists a unique glimpse into Jamaica's role on the region's historical stage. The Jamaican state in turn controls a narrative about the national identity in terms of this settler colonial history. Close proximity to the material and aesthetic cultures of Europe situates Jamaica as a special travel destination indeed: all the tropical beauty you expect in a Caribbean island, the palms, sea, and rain forests, and the easily identifiable edificial markers of a stable, safe, and culturally cogent civilization. The cruise ship port of Falmouth in the Trelawny Parish provides a paradigmatic example of this type of constructed heritage. Walking tours of the city's colonial architecture are promoted by the Jamaican government's tourist entity, The Jamaican Product Development Company; however, no mention is made of the port's history as a center of the islands's sugar cane plantation system and the implications this has for the sites linkages to the slave trade.⁷⁰ In purposely neglecting the foundational history of the slave trade's role in the development of this site and the Jamaican nation as a whole, the Jamaican government crafts a national history specifically designed not to offend or challenge white tourists from the United States and Europe.

⁶⁹ Francis-Lindsay, Janice. "The Intrinsic Value of Cultural Heritage and its Relationship to Sustainable Tourism Development: The Contrasting Experiences of Jamaica and Japan." *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (06, 2009): 151-167, 190-191.

⁷⁰ Aarons, John A. 2020. "The Colonial Past and Heritage Tourism: a Jamaican Dilemma." *Round Table (London)* 109 (5): 624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2020.1820215>.

So, what do the Rastafari of the Rastafari Indigenous Village offer alongside and against this national tourist history? By employing the term *indigenous*, I move that the Rastafari of the RIV are creating their own counter-narratives which work both against and alongside the prevailing national tourist histories rooted in settler coloniality. The indigenous Native American Arawak population of Jamaica was virtually annihilated prior to the British conquest of the island from the Spanish in the 17th century. Thus, the Rastafari Indigenous Village does not seek to draw historical lineages, parallels, or connections to the island's pre-colonial inhabitants. Instead, the RIV constructs an Afro-centric Jamaican indigeneity that emerged in tandem with the island's settler colonial society. Rastafari is indigenous to Jamaica in the sense that it developed on the island due to the particular political, social, cultural, and ecological schema found thereon. However, for the Rastas a claim of indigeneity goes further.

Nativeness here represents more than mixture, more than creative amalgamation within the context of violent stratification. It is mobilized instead to draw attention to a history of disenfranchisement—both politically and in relation to landownership.⁷¹

Deborah Thomas renders the Rasta claim to indigeneity as a rendering of a particular relationship between marginalized groups and the land upon which they live. This is particularly useful for understanding the Rastafarian claim to indigeneity considering Rastafari's livity as a lifeway that inseverably centers the connections between human beings and the natural world. Furthermore, Rastafari's very relevant rhetorical connection to the maroon communities who established tenuous sovereignty over their own land is central to any construction of Rastafari's indigeneity.

⁷¹ Thomas, Deborah A. 2011. *Exceptional Violence :embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 213

Through food, agriculture, organic artistic mediums like woodcarving, and plant kinship through ganja, Rasta theologies reflect the tradition's commitment to land stewardship and ecological consciousness. Rastas intentionally utilize the language of indigeneity with this in mind; by rhetorically attaching their tradition to global discourses on indigenous rights around land ownership, community autonomy, and cultural/intellectual property, Rastas make their tradition legible within the broad cultural market. Rastas at the RIV offer a heritage rooted in the land, and importantly their heritage does not obfuscate the role of race-based violence in the formation of an authentic Jamaican identity. This claim to authenticity is key. The Rastafari Indigenous Village situates itself as a real and true glimpse into the Rastafarian faith and the Afro-centric cultures of Jamaica more broadly. RIV Rastas' claim on indigenous authenticity is deeply tied to the tradition's claiming of maroon ancestry as well. By posturing their connection to people who historically stewarded Jamaican land as a mechanism of resistance to white supremacist colonial rule, Rastas accomplish two rhetorical goals at once: they establish their role in Jamaica's longstanding history and assert their current role in ongoing Black liberation efforts.

Tourism scholar Janice Francis-Lindsay writes that "heritage tourism is not sustainable if societies attach only economic (dollar) value and political (biased) value; societies must first seek to establish and promote continued "intrinsic social value" of heritage that can be "sustained" in any environment."⁷² Rastafari of the RIV do just that. Although the village was explicitly designed as a tourist destination, it was intentionally constructed to feel lived in.

⁷² Francis-Lindsay, Janice. "The Intrinsic Value of Cultural Heritage and its Relationship to Sustainable Tourism Development: The Contrasting Experiences of Jamaica and Japan." *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (06, 2009): 151-167, 190-191. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/scholarly-journals/intrinsic-value-cultural-heritage-relationship/docview/221158720/se-2>.

Artisans craft and create within the RIV in accordance not only with their desire to make money, but their spiritual and theological prerogatives as well. With this in mind, the Rastafari of the RIV, engaged in very explicit and intentional commodification of their tradition are not a bastardization or divergence from the longstanding relationship between Rasta people and commodification. Like the first Rasta community at Leonard Percival Howell's Pinnacle, the Rastafari of the RIV engage with a version of capitalist exchange that reflects the theological imagination of Rastafari while providing for community success in spite of state abandonment.

Conclusions

The music video for "Skankin' Sweet" begins by illustrating the stress and malaise associated with commoditizing time and productivity; however, it doesn't end in abject acquiescence or wholesale acceptance of this condition. No, through multi-generational artistic production, attunement to the natural world, and faith in Jah, the protagonists of the narrative arrive in a state of *irie*, or Rastafarian bliss. Importantly, they achieve irie not by completely leaving the systems that exploit them. There's no montage of each character quitting their day jobs to finally realize their essential Rastafarian fulfillment. No, each character is able to exist in a state of Rastafarian joy and spiritual delight while still grappling with the dissonance between their anti-exploitative, anti-capitalist convictions and their lived understanding that they must navigate capitalist, exploitative systems in order to survive. While ceasing enmeshment with colonial, white supremacist structures is a historically stated goal of Rastafari and its repatriation, reparation philosophy, one must be extremely cautious of essentializing true Rastafari as a spiritual tradition which must necessarily reject all mechanisms of Babylon to the detriment of adherents' life chances. This is to say, Rastas do not need to economically flagellate themselves

in order to imagine possibilities outside of the neoliberal moment of the present. Historically, Rastafari's critique of the West and its systems of oppression remains rooted in a critique of white supremacy as the overarching ideology which informs the methods of oppression of Black colonial subjects. One cannot uncritically call Rastas anti-imperial without closely examining Rastafari's commitments to a Black Emperor of a Black African kingdom. In a similar vein, we must understand Rastafari's particular critique of capitalism as a critique of a particular type of race based capitalism which includes chattel slavery and its descendant systems that deny Black workers access to financial stability. Rastas have long imagined success for their communities through autonomous Black entrepreneurial enterprise, as has been shown in the early example of Pinnacle and continuing discussions around Rastafari's place in Jamaica's legitimized cannabis industry. Rasta artists currently enjoy an ongoing moment of global cultural relevance thanks in no small part to commercially accessible reggae music. Commodification may seem contradictory to Rastafari's radical origins which rooted the new traditions in a contrarian posture to forms of economic activity and political discourse that served colonial interests; however, commodification has continually hallmarked Rastafari's survival in Jamaica and the Jamaican diaspora. As globalization and Rastafari have evolved in tandem over the last century, Rastafari serves as an important study in the ways marginalized religious traditions evolve to meet new challenges while maintaining the particular spiritual, artistic, and cultural schema that make them useful for the communities that brought them into being.

Indeed, Rastafari emerged as an answer to colonially informed religious traditions that sought to relegate Black subjects to the recipients of religious knowledge or legitimacy, never the creators. Rastafari has always been a tradition of creators. They constructed communities,

physical and kinship, built activism networks that resisted Western epistemological hegemony, and crafted stories and histories that contextualized all of this within longstanding and firmly rooted origins. Rastafari continues in this tradition to this day, creatively contending with the inequities and violences against which the tradition formed while renegotiating its relationship to the evolving systems of an increasingly global economic machine.

The primary purpose of this analysis is to complexify the discourse surrounding Rastafari's internal commodification, this is to say the commodification of Rastafari by Rastas. By acknowledging the depth and lineage of Rastafari's own versions of cultural and religious commodification, we might begin to better distinguish between contextual marginalized desires for community success and types of commodity which extract cultural capital in order to hoard wealth. While Rastas may not ideally wish to engage with the tourist industry from a theo-political point of view, they recognize a more salient theological imperative which is the success and flourishing of Black communities. In this moment of globalized mass artistic production, Rastas also acknowledge that their unique cultural aesthetics are sought after in a global moment wherein indigenous, earth centered, and African heritage artistic cultures are relevant and desired outside of their traditional communities like never before. If they don't control their own cultural representation in the market, someone else will, and if they don't create avenues of capital accumulation for the success of their own communities, no one else will. For this reason, Rastafari represents a vital case for the study of the current enmeshments of African diasporic traditions with ongoing manifestations of historical economic, religious, and social exploitation. As exploitative and oppressive structures evolve, so too must religious and spiritual counter-technologies contend with alternative futures both through and against these

prevailing systems. In all, Rastas want to live well, and in this world, that means they need money. Any analysis of Rastafari's internal commodification that doesn't contend with this truth lacks clarity and a critical attunement to the theologically prescribed success, safety, and stability of Black communities which the tradition espouses as vital.

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