ARTICLES

BLACK WADADA: DREADLOCKS, BEARDS, AND ANTICOLONIALISM AMONG RASTAFARI MEN IN JAMAICA

DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES, PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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FELIPE NEIS ARAUJO
ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7119-5664
University of Manchester, Manchester, United KingdoM, M13 9PL - daniel.davies@manchester.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I unpack the politics intertwined with two bodily practices observed by many Rastafarian men in Jamaica: the sporting of dreadlocks and beards. I begin with the political history of the dreadlocks and beards in Jamaica, showing how they became connected to notions of Africanism and the social life of biblical texts in the Rastafarian Movement. I argue that these techniques of caring for the body translate Rastafarian anti-colonial politics that challenge and criticize colonial and postcolonial aesthetics and modes of existence on the Caribbean island, which gives rise to reflections on belonging, sovereignty, and diasporic Africanity.

KEYWORDS
Rastafari; Body; Dreadlocks; Politics; Jamaica.

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"

—Genesis 1:26, King James Version

"...for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people"

—2 Corinthians 6:16, King James Version

"Wadada means love in Africa

[...] Black Wadada

Revive for I & I

Wadada! Wo-ho-ho! Wadada!"

—Burning Spear, "The Invasion (Black Wadada)"

In May 2020, a 78-year-old Rasta elder had the beard he cultivated for decades shaved without his consent, or even knowledge, while admitted to a hospital in Linstead, Jamaica. The episode caused outrage among the Rastafarian community and brought to light once again a modality of symbolic violence inflicted upon Rastas since the inception of the Movement in the early 1930s: the cutting of locks and beard against a person's will. The Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sports, Olivia "Babsy" Grange, requested the Minister of Health and Welfare to investigate the episode, and asserted that trimming dreadlocks and shaving beards of Rastas who seek public health services is not a government policy (Jamaica Observer 2020).

Dreadlocks form when hair and beards grow freely, forming spontaneous knots. This way of caring for the body—which, at first sight, may evoke more negligence than care—became widespread among Rastas between the 1950s and the 1960s. Dreadlocks and beards became strong indexes of Rastafari praxes related to blackness, Africanness, and belonging, challenging the colonial and postcolonial aesthetics and bodily politics that valued and privileged British looks and gestuality. Cutting dreadlocks and beards is one of the historical forms of physical and psychological abuse inflicted by the Jamaican state upon Rastas through its armed and police forces, along with imprisonment in jails and mental asylums.

The materiality of Rastafarian bodies and the sets of symbolic and political relations they activate and translate are not limited, however, to a technique of caring for hair. Modes of eating, dressing, and adorning, and, especially, the narratives about these practices also constitute the Rastafarian body. In what follows, I analyze how the word becomes flesh and flesh becomes word among Rasta men in Jamaica. Rastafari bodies enunciate a series of relationships and conflicts related to citizenship,

belonging, history, morality, and justice in the Caribbean country. They activate links with Africa, challenge British colonization and the postcolonial state, create alternative modalities of relation with the world and the things that exist in it.

As Miriam (Rabelo 2011) noted, the subject of corporeality is not new in the social sciences. It goes back to the classic essays of (Mauss 1973; 1985), inspires Bourdieu's (2010) and Butler's (1993) works, and animates the concept of embodiment proposed by (Csordas 1994; 2002; Csordas and Jenkins 2020). In the field of indigenous ethnology, the paradigm of corporeality stimulated an epistemological reorientation since the classic essay penned by Seeger, da Matta, and Viveiros de Castro (1979); a classic in the sense attributed to the concept by Italo Calvino (1991). It does not cease to speak years after its first publication and was recently translated into English and published in a prestigious magazine (Seeger, Da Matta, and Viveiros de Castro 2019).

I want to follow the ideas of Seeger, Viveiros de Castro, and Da Matta about the fabrication of bodies in the indigenous Amazon and mobilize them to unpack a Caribbean experience. I will take the Rastafari body as an "instrument, activity, [something] that articulates social and cosmological meanings," taking it as "a matrix of symbols and an object of thought," (Seeger, Viveiros de Castro and Da Matta 1979: 11) but also of action. Several Rastafarian bodily practices translate the Movement's politics: the sporting of dreadlocks on the head, the bearded face, the food taboos, the use of ganja.[1] The performance of these practices creates Rastafarian bodies and persons. The Rastafarian body, therefore, can be thought of as a microcosm—to use an expression that Turner (1967) mobilizes to describe the Ndembu body. It is a tool that creates a world and modalities of relationship with it that configure particular modes of existence (Latour 2013). In this essay, though, I will focus on the political history of dreadlocks and beards among Rastas in Jamaica.

The history of the Rastafarian Movement is widely known. Its roots date back to the coronation of Ras Tafari Makonnen as Emperor of Ethiopia in November 1930. When the news about the coronation of a Black emperor in Africa reached the Jamaican shores it was soon connected to the long tradition of Ethiopianism deep-rooted in the island.[2] Popular prophets

1. On the use of ganja among Jamaican Rastas see Rubin e Comitas 1976; Chevannes 2004; Murrell 2008; Niaah 2016; Araujo, 2018. On the politics of I-tal see Dickerson 2004 and Jaffe 2010.

2. According to Charles Price (2003, 31), "Ethiopianism has provided a racial, religious, and moral framework for comprehending and criticizing history, the social world, and especially racial and economic inequalities." It emerged before the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and spread throughout the Caribbean, Europe and Africa (ibid.). In Jamaica it gained strength with Marcus Garvey's activism and his advocacy for the return of Black people to Africa. In his speeches and writings, which were strongly inspired by biblical language and imagery, he stressed the need for an exodus towards the original land, the

began to spread the idea that Selassie was the embodiment of Jehovah; the reincarnated Christ that had come to redeem Black people from the violence of captivity, colonialism, and racism. God, in the Rastafarian translation, is a Black African Living Man.[3] Haile Selassie I's coronation was perceived through political and symbolical lenses in Jamaica. Several people connected the African monarch's coronation to biblical prophecies about the redemption of God's chosen people and pan-Africanist politics of sovereignty and self-determination for Africans in Africa and the diaspora.

In Rastafarian discourses and narratives, the biblical texts are detached from their original interactional contexts and mobilized to give life to another history, that of African people enslaved by Europeans and taken by force from their places of origin to captured lands across the Atlantic Ocean. The process of entextualization and recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990) operated through biblical and Pan-Africanist Rastafarian poetics blurs the borders between the Americas, the Caribbean, Egypt, Babylon, and Zion. The figure of the "chosen people" is translated, through embodiment and language, as the African people in the diaspora. In Rastafarian linguistic ideology, Egypt and Babylon become Jamaica; Eden and Zion are synonymous with Africa and Ethiopia; David, Solomon, and other biblical characters are portrayed in Black bodies. As Carole Yawney has pointed out (1977, 233), "the terms Africa and Ethiopia are frequently interchanged [in Rastafarian discourse], following a precedent set by Marcus Garvey, who referred to Africa as Ethiopia." These processes of decontextualization, entextualization, and recontextualization operate in the fabrication of meanings and show how discourse is "a rich, intricate, and dynamic expression of, mediator of, and indeed creator and recreator of the language-culture- society- individual nexus" (Sherzer 1987, 302).

Bodily techniques play a fundamental role in the performance of and reflexivity on Rastafarian personhood and, among these techniques, orality has an important place (Chevannes 1994; Homiak 1995; Nettleford 1998; Pulis 1999). The careful mobilization of lexicon and discourse in everyday and ritual situations, which requires poetic skills, underlies Rastafarian ontology and epistemology and is materialized in the expression *Word, Sound, Power*. In what follows, I analyze the politics of Rastafarian personhood and show how it is constituted through the fabrication of bodies and narratives about them. My focus, as previously stated, is the political history of beards and dreadlocks. I argue that Rastafari bodies

place of redemption for the Black man. Many times Garvey mobilised biblical topography to name the African continent, calling it Ethiopia or Abyssinia. Garvey enacted a politics of belonging by articulating geography, cosmology, and soteriology through the image of a biblical exodus of God's chosen people towards the African continent. On Garvey see Lewis 1987, 1998.

3. On the roots and transformations of the Rastafarian Movement in Jamaica see Barnett 2018 and 2002; Bonacci 2016 and 2013; Chevannes 1994 and 1995; Hill 1983 and 2001; Hutton et al. 2015.

and narratives about them are powerful tools for challenging colonialism and racism in Jamaica and that bodies are fabricated, cultivated, and mobilized to refashion the past, the present, and the future (Scott 1999).

Before proceeding, however, I must make it clear that I will not discuss identity processes, identity politics, or even resort to the category of "identity". I deal with bodily politics and aesthetics whose semantics challenge the British colonial standards in Jamaica. In particular, I want to consider how the embodiment of Rastafarian personhood operates a cultural translation of Christianity, a colonial tool, to reclaim belonging, sovereignty, and Africanity; to fabricate and mobilize memories (Hanchard 2008). A translation is always a political act, as Talal Asad (1986) taught us. I mobilize the category of "person" and think of Rastafarian personhood throughout the Movement's history by following the enactments of bodily politics. These are the categories that guide my reflection. My central argument, I advance, is that the Rasta dreadlocks and beards are political tools that challenge British aesthetics and question the legitimacy of British rule. I articulate the categories of corporeality and personhood to unpack the historical process of struggle against colonialism.

BODY, HISTORY, POLITICS

Joseph Owens (1976) noted that Jamaican colonial society inscribed negative connotations in the semantics of the words *black* and *negro*. According to Jah Bones, a social scientist, and Rastafarian, everything that is bad in the eyes of the white colonizer was described as black, "while white is good, correct, pure and everything that opposes black" (Jah Bones 1986: 46). In colonial language, everything that was black or derived from it was taken as bad and impure, including bodies. Historically, in Jamaica, skin color can either open or close doors, it can make life either easier or much harder for a citizen (Alexander 1977; Ford-Smith 1994; Henriques 1951; Nettleford 1998). Many Jamaican citizens expect to marry a lighter-skinned person to achieve social mobility, to be perceived as more respectable, and, thus, to be able to provide a better future for their children (Altink 2019b; 2019a). The expression that names the desire and practice of marrying a fair-skinned person, preferably white, allows a glimpse of the persistence of the racial hierarchy in Jamaica: *marry up*. The fairer the skin, the higher its position in the social/racial hierarchy. Another practice that allows us to apprehend the strength of Jamaican colorism is that of bleaching the skin with chemicals that are often toxic.[4] Historical racial hierarchies have also produced stereotypes of exacerbated sexuality and vulgarity and portrayed violence as a "cultural trait" of Black Jamaicans—characteristics attributed to their African cultural heritage.[5]

4. On bleaching see Brown-Glaude 2007 and 2013; Charles 2011 and Robinson 2011, but compare with Hope 2011 and James 2013). On the body as a social index in Jamaica see Hurston 1937; Alleyne 2005 [2002] and Araujo 2014.
5. See Thomas 2011, especially chapter 4.

When American anthropologist, folklorist, and novelist Zora Neale Hurston visited Jamaica to conduct fieldwork on religious practices, in 1937, she was impressed by the fact that many Jamaicans, in a country of overwhelmingly African-descended people, made great efforts to look like Europeans by imitating British accents and affections. It seemed to Hurston that "in Jamaica, it [was] the aim of everybody to talk English, act English and *look* English." (Hurston 1990, 6. The emphasis in the original.) She also noted (ibid., 7) that "[e]verywhere else a person is white or black by birth, but it is so arranged in Jamaica that a person may be black by birth but white by proclamation. That is, he gets himself declared legally white." She underscored the contrast between Jamaica and the US, "where anyone who has colored blood, no matter how white they look, refers to themselves as black" (ibid.). And to refine her description, she tells us an anecdote she heard. It is worth citing the full passage:

> I was told that the late John Hope, late President of Atlanta University, precipitated panic in Kingston on his visit there in 1935, a few months before his death. He was quite white in appearance and when he landed and visited the Rockefeller Institute in Kingston and was so honored by them, the "census white" Jamaicans assumed that he was of pure white blood. A great banquet was given him at the Myrtle Bank Hotel, which is the last word in swank in Jamaica. All went well until John Hope was called upon to respond to a toast. He began his reply with, "We negroes—." Several people all but collapsed. John Hope was whiter than any of the mulattoes there who had had themselves ruled white. So that if a man as white as that called himself a negro, what about them? Consternation struck the banquet like a blight. Of course, there were real white English and American people there too, and I would have loved to have read their minds at that moment. I certainly would. (Hurston 1990, 7-8.)

Being a Black American intellectual herself, she commented that this "situation present[ed] a curious spectacle to the eyes of an American Negro" (ibid., 7.)

I wonder what Hurston would have to say about the adepts of the Rastafari Movement, which was gaining momentum by the time she visited Jamaica. She did not have contact with them—or, if she did, she did not register it in her published work. I strongly believe that she would be interested in a movement that opposed the Anglophilia of the Jamaican economic elite and wanted to distance themselves from the colonial modes of existence. From the early days of the Movement, Rastas valued blackness and Africaness, denounced the British government for the crime of slavery and the physical and symbolic oppressions mobilized by the state against its black citizens.

During the first decades of the Movement's existence, the sporting of dreadlocks was not as widespread as that of beards. The cultivation of beards activated a link to the bodily techniques of biblical characters such as Solomon, Samson—whose physical strength, according to Hebrew folklore, emanated from his long locks—and Jesus Christ, in addition, of course, to those practiced by Haile Selassie (Chevannes 1994, 157-158). In the late 1940s, with the radicalization of some wings of the Movement, growing and sporting dreadlocks became widespread, and became an index of Rastafarian corporeality and politics. This bodily practice was then connected to the biblical Nazirite vow (Numbers 6) which, among other precepts, prohibits the cutting of hair and beard.

In his 1954 novel "Brother Man, Jamaican novelist Roger Mais handled this theme with sensitivity. The main character of the story is a peaceful Rastaman, who embodies serenity in his ways of walking, acting, and speaking. Although he is neither a violent person nor a potential threat, some people despised him due to his dreadlocks long beard. In a certain scene, Brother Man finds himself surrounded by children who insult him and tell him to shave his beard. Brother Man, however, observed this bodily care as he followed the path indicated by the sacred texts of the Bible. There is an important scene where the Rastaman tries to explain why he doesn't shave his beard to a little boy. The boy and the Rasta are sitting on a beach where Brother Man had met the child selling crabs. After some considerations about dietary practices, they start talking about the Rastaman's body. The child was curious to know why Brother Man let his hair and beard grow freely instead of keeping it trimmed and coiffed. The Rastafarian elder then explains to the boy that he observes the Nazirite vow, a vow that was also observed by Samson according to the Hebrew folklore. He tells the child that he follows the way of biblical men, and how Africans became Jehovah's chosen people:

> "Brah man, why you wear beard on you' face?"
>
> "Son, it is de Bible way. It is de way of John de Baptist, an' of Samson, who killed a thousand Philistines, an' a lion with his naked han's (sic)."
>
> (...)
>
> "De spirit of de Lawd was wit' him. Amen."
>
> "Is dat why you grow you' beard? Cos you wan' to be like Samson?"
>
> "De spirit of the Lawd went over into Ethiopia when Israel was parted among the nations. (...) So it was black men out of Africa who became God's chosen people, for they have learned the Way." (Mais 2004, 75-76.)

In the 1950s, when Brother Man was published, Jamaican society "simply did not accept unkempt hair. Not to comb one's hair was to declare oneself not merely antisocial but extra-social, like mad derelicts and outcasts" (Chevannes 1994, 158). But there was more in the Rastafarian politics of bodily techniques. The emergence of dreadlocks in Jamaica also points to the attention Rastas paid to the aesthetics and politics of other anti-colonial movements that challenged the British Empire at the time. Jamaican sociologist Horace Campbell (1987) asserts that dreadlocks began to emerge and became widespread at the same time that stories on the Mau Mau warriors of Kenya, who also sported dreadlocks and fought against colonialism, started to appear in the pages of Jamaican newspapers. The aesthetics and politics of the Mau Mau have influenced the Rastafarian collectivity called The Youth Black Faith, which instituted the sporting of dreadlocks as a tenet. The display of dreadlocks instituted by this collectivity sought to relate the anti-colonial struggle of Jamaicans to that of their African peers, both directed against the British Empire (Campbell, 1987). A Rasta elder told me, some years ago, in Kingston, that one of the etymologies of the term "dreadlocks" refers to the terror (dread) around in colonial authorities by those who sported this hairstyle. Many decades before I conducted my fieldwork in Kingston, Rastas told the Jamaican anthropologist Barry Chevannes that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, precisely in the period when dreadlocks began to emerge, Rastas began to recognize themselves as outcasts and outsiders in the Jamaican society, giving these concepts another political meaning. They began to understand and accept that Jamaica was not their homeland, and that, being Jamaican-born *Africans*, they belong in Africa (Chevannes 1995).

I & I A NATTY DREADLOCKS

"*Nowadays dem a braid, twist, and dem a plait*

But I & I a Natty Dreadlocks"

—Israel Vibration, "Natty Dread"

The years leading up to Jamaica's independence from the United Kingdom in 1962 saw an escalation of state violence against Rastas (van Dijk 1995). One of the reasons for the increased repression, as Deborah Thomas (2011) points out, was the Movement's strong criticism of the nationalist project that was being built—a project that aimed to establish a postcolonial national state "within the parameters—violently maintained—that were established by the Cold War and growing US hegemony" (Thomas 2017, 84). I should add, however, that the years after Independence—and let us take 1963 as emblematic when the Jamaican state massacred Rastas in Montego Bay (Thomas 2011) and began the destruction of historic Rastafarian communities in Kingston (Clarke 2016; Araujo 2018)—were also of constant

physical and symbolic violence directed at Rastafarian individuals and collectivities. In this context, the bodily politics of sporting dreadlocks has caused a series of barriers to Rastas throughout history: dismissals, unemployment, unwanted attention from the police and military forces, physical and verbal aggression from members of the civil society, prohibition to attend certain public institutions. Thomas (2011: 200) also highlights that "as recently as the 1980s and 1990s, examples abound of elders being denied entrance to public businesses or Rastafarian children being removed from prestigious schools because they refused to trim their hair."

The politics and poetics of cultivating dreadlocks and beards, which challenged colonial aesthetics and politics, contributed to the energetic reactions of the Jamaican state. Violence against Rastas became part of the generalized state violence that has dragged on the Caribbean island since the slavery period. Ras Mortimo Planno, one of the main Rastafarian leaders from the 1960s until his death in 2005 used to say that between the 1940s and 1960s, the Rastas became extremists. According to him, still, his parents' generation was against this extremism and feared the state's reprisals that materialized not only in the form of home invasion by the police but also in beatings, incarceration, and commitment to mental asylums. When sociologist Anita Waters conducted fieldwork with Rastas and their families in Kingston, in 1982, an interlocutor told her that many parents became uneasy when their children became Rastas:

> The pressure come from when shall Rasta in our house, anytime the policeman can kick in the door and come in. People have them one son them love, them check them, son, come back in with all these dreadlocks... They might feel vex but that is not the thing. The only thing that them fret for is because he is a Rasta, they have to feel him gone to prison soon... So your people fret for you under the circumstances there, so them say "no come here Jah Rastafari, policeman come too." (Waters 1985, 104-105.)

The persecution of dreadlocks and the tensions it generated in the social relations of Rastas throughout the Movement's history were also registered in the Jamaican cultural production. In 1980 the Twinkle Brothers released an album titled *Countrymen*. In *Since I Throw The Comb Away*, one of the album's tracks, the Rasta duo sing about the misfortunes suffered by a dreadlocked Rastaman:

> Since I throw the comb away/ My mommy don't wanna see me no more/ My papa say "don't come at the house no more"/ I used to be the pride of the family/ But now I'm the black sheep (...)/ I got fired from my job last Monday/ For no reason at all/ The boss man called me to his office and gives me a two weeks pay/ And say: "You throw the comb away! There's no vacancy for you today" (Twinkle Brothers, 1980: track 7.)

The song's lyrics refer to the problem described by Anita Waters' interviewee: when an individual starts cultivating dreadlocks, his parents start to treat him differently. If before he was well regarded and well-liked after he starts to observe a technique of bodily care that indexes his belonging to the Rastafari Movement, he becomes an unwanted person. He loses his job despite claiming to be a hard worker. The social roles he had—a son, a worker—are now violently denied. But he also disowns them, for now, he has fabricated different ontological and political positions for himself. Now he is a Rastaman, he severed his ties to the Babylonian society and devotes himself to Jah. For dreadlocks not only mark but also *constitute* a separation between the Rastaman and Babylon. Once a man accepts the call of Rastafari his social relations are reconfigured, but so are his cosmological relations. The dreadlocks become an index of belonging to the African lineage of Jah, Creator of the Earth and everything that exists on it; Creator of humanity and time.

Still in the field of Rastafarian music, songs like *Revelation Time*, by Max Romeo (1975: track 1) denounced the abusive practice of cutting off Rastas dreadlocks and beards, a modality of physical and symbolic violence enforced by the Jamaican police and military forces. Descriptions of these and other forms of violence also abound in the literature on the Movement. But despite the violence perpetrated by the state and the civil society,[6] the Rastafarian Movement has grown exponentially since the 1960s, having even attracted the attention and the sympathy of progressive politicians like Michael Manley, who served as Prime Minister of Jamaica from 1972 to 1980 and from 1989 to 1992 (see Waters, 1985). Since the 1970s, Rastafarian colors and symbols have been co-opted by the Jamaican government and entrepreneurs in the processes of creating and marketing the "brand Jamaica" (Lewis 2017). This process, however, is carefully articulated not to endorse the Afrocentrism of the Rastafarian Movement, but to promote the liberal ideas of the Jamaican postcolonial creole elite embodied in the national motto; "Out of many, one people".

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, Rastafarians have transformed the cultivation of dreadlocks and beards into symbols of Africanness and defiance of the Jamaican state. This bodily politics is also a way of operating and translating differentiations between those who follow the sacred prescriptions and seek to live in the image and likeness of the Creator and those who reject his commandments. But there is more to Rastafarian bodily politics. The ways of dressing configure a set of important political practices as well. Some Rastas dress to emulate the image and likeness of Emperor Haile Selassie in his official appearances, in khaki military uniforms.

6. On the persecution and violence against Rastas by the Jamaican and civilians see also the ethnographic documentary *Bad Friday* (Thomas et al. 2011).

Instead of the military medals worn by the Ethiopian emperor, however, they bear the medals of a holy war waged against the pagans. Some medals bear the emperor's face; others bear Marcus Garvey's. They might also be R-shaped medals—the R for Rastafari, Redemption, Reparation, Repatriation—painted in green, red and yellow, the colors of the imperial Ethiopian flag. There are also medals shaped like the African continent, with biblical quotes, and quotes by or attributed to Selassie, Garvey, and other prophets. Other Rastas decorate their bodies with clothing in Ethiopian colors, whether tunics or T-shirts, pants or robes, turbans or wool hats. Symbols such as the Lion of Judah and the Egyptian ankh cross are also popular in the fabrication and decoration of Rastafari bodies. The many ways of dressing—and talk about dressing—among Jamaican Rastafarian men deserves a study.

I must also underscore that this essay dealt with the bodily practices of Rastafarian men, but there is literature that deals with the place of women in the Movement and that deserve to be consulted when thinking about corporeality among Rasta women.[7]

As a closing remark, I would like to recapitulate and summarise my arguments. The Rastafarian body evokes a series of relationships between the Chosen People and Jah, the Creator—and in the Rastafarian discourse and narratives, both Jah and His Chosen people are Black and African. The love for Africa and the scorn for the British Empire were seen as threats first by the colonial authorities, and later by the postcolonial creole elite who wanted to build a sense of Jamaicaness by homogenizing and whitewashing history, sweeping the violence of colonialism under the carpet by promoting the post-independence motto "Out of many, one people". The refusal of Rastas to forget Africa and Transatlantic slavery is a refusal to accept the official narrative of peaceful miscegenation. The Rastafarian body is, therefore, an instrument of memorialization—to use Hanchard's (2008) expression. It is an instrument. Not a mere bodily reflection of a symbolic repertoire, but an active tool of a Rastafarian politics of remembering the past, assessing the present, and refashioning possible futures.

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7. See, e.g. Rowe 1980; Austin-Broos 1987; Lake 1994 and 1998; Yawney 1994a; Tafari-Ama 1998; Julien 2003 and Christense, 2014. For a reflection on the implications of being a woman ethnographer and conducting fieldwork among Rastas in Jamaica see Montlouis 2013.

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Felipe Neis Araujo is a researcher at the Department of Criminology at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. He holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC, Brazil) and is a member of the Study Group on Orality and Performance (GESTO, financed by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, Brazil). He was a professor at the University of Liberia and at the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation. He writes a monthly column on drug policy and state violence in Brazil for TalkingDrugs.org and tweets at the @legaliseNrepair. Email: felipe.neisaraujo@manchester.ac.uk

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