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Constructing Spiritual Blackness

Rastafari in Puerto Rico

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Abstract

In this article, I address how my interlocutors, members of the Rastafari community in Puerto Rico, claim that they identify with Blackness and Africanness in a manner different from other Black-identifying Puerto Ricans. Their identification process presents a spiritual and global construction of Blackness that does not fit within the typical narratives often used to discuss Black identity in Puerto Rico. I argue that their performance of a spiritually Black identity creates a different understanding of Blackness in Puerto Rico, one that is not nation-based but rather worldwide. This construction of Blackness and Black identity allows my interlocutors to create an imagined community of Blackness and African descent that extends past Puerto Rico's borders toward the greater Caribbean region and African continent. In the first section, I discuss how Blackness is understood and emplaced in Puerto Rico and why this construction is considered too limiting by my interlocutors. I then address their own construction of Blackness, what I refer to as "spiritual Blackness," and how they believe it diverges from Afro-Boricua/Black Puerto Rican identity. In the final section, I direct focus to how Africa is centralized in the construction of spiritual Blackness.

Keywords

Rastafari – Blackness – Puerto Rico – Afrocentrism – imagined communities

On February 6, 2015, a reggae concert was held in celebration of Bob Marley's birthday in the Bahia Urbana section of Old San Juan. The headliners were Alborosie and Don Carlos whose names and faces were emblazoned on the posters I had seen plastered all over San Juan as I rode the bus. My key inter-

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locutor, León, let me know that he would be there, as would quite a few of the other Rastas he knew.[1] The event was held outdoors on the waterfront, with concertgoers gathering in groups on the grassy area in front of the stage. Those closest to the stage were standing in a tight group while others were further back sitting in lawn chairs or on blankets from home. Some had set up kiosks to sell food, art, or accessories during the concert. During an intermission, León introduced me to a few other Rastas including Judah, who was selling vegan food and juices at the event. As we started to talk, I brought up the topic of race and racism. Everyone had a strong opinion on the matter, expressing frustration with how African heritage is consistently downplayed or ignored in Puerto Rico, that schools do not teach students about the history of Africans on the island,[2] the severity of racism despite the common assurances that Puerto Rico has an issue of class and not of race, and the refusal by a large part of the population to acknowledge their African ancestry. When I mentioned that many Puerto Ricans do not consider themselves Black, Judah shook his head and stated, "We are Afro-Caribbeans."[3]

Rastafari is not widely practiced in Puerto Rico, with less than a hundred adherents,[4] most of whom are men. They are not concentrated in particular areas although I have noticed slightly more Rastas living in the metropolitan area, in rural parts of the west coast of the main island, and on the island of Vieques. In Puerto Rico, among the Rastafari community is what I consider to be a divergent construction of Blackness, a diasporic, spiritual Blackness beyond the island. While they may feel some sort of camaraderie with Puerto Ricans who celebrate their Blackness or African heritage within a Puerto Rican context, Rastas clearly associate with foreign expressions of Blackness not indigenous to Puerto Rico. I believe that this is partially due to Rastafari ideology that stresses connections to the African continent, notably the importance of Black leaders in the movement such as Jamaica's Marcus Garvey,[5] Anguilla's

1 All interlocutors' names are pseudonyms.

2 Even though Puerto Rico is technically an archipelago comprised of the main island and several smaller ones, it is often referred to collectively as an *isla* or island.

3 All translations are the author's; in some cases the original Spanish is included in footnotes as certain statements are considered more profound in the original language.

4 I constantly asked different people for an estimation of how large the community is in Puerto Rico but no one had a definitive answer. I came up with this number based on discussions with my interlocutors. I am also very aware that an accurate number is incredibly difficult to determine and must clarify that my figure is at best an educated guess.

5 Marcus Mosiah Garvey was a Jamaican political leader revered as a prophet among Rastas. Much of Rastafari ideology was profoundly impacted by his teachings and philosophy.

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Robert Athlyi, and of course H.I.M. Haile Selassie I[6] of Ethiopia. This is also due to my interlocutors' desire to form bonds to the African continent but more specifically to Ethiopia.

In this article, I address the Puerto Rican Rastas' claim that they identify with Blackness and Africanness in a manner different from many other Black- or African-identified Puerto Ricans.[7] Their identification process presents a spiritual construction of Blackness that does not fit within the popular narratives that are often used to address Black identity in Puerto Rico. I argue that their performance of what I term a "spiritually Black" identity creates a divergent construction of Blackness, one that is not nation-based but rather global. This conception of Blackness and Black identity allows the spiritually Black Boricua[8] Rastas (henceforth referred to as SBBRs) to create an imagined community of Blackness and African descent that extends well past Puerto Rico's borders toward the greater Caribbean region and African continent. In the first section, I discuss how Blackness is understood and emplaced in Puerto Rico and why this construction is considered too limiting by the SBBRs. I then address the SBBRs' own construction of Blackness, what I refer to as "spiritual Blackness," and how they believe it diverges from Afro-Boricua/Black Puerto Rican identity. In the final section, I direct focus to how Africa is centralized in the creation of spiritual Blackness. Throughout the article, as I address how the SBBRs throw off dominant Puerto Rican understandings of Blackness and African identity, I analyze the implications of their identity formation, namely their devaluation of Afro-Boricua identity, the privilege of being able to create a stigmatized identity, and their homogenization of the African continent.

SBBRs understand their Blackness as being part of a wide network unbound by national borders, recognizing it as part of a global "imagined community" of Black folk. Historian and political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983) introduced the concept of imagined communities in reference to nationalism. He describes a nation as a community that is socially constructed and "imagined" in that the community is so large that it is improbable for all members to know each other, yet they feel bound together through a shared group identity. Similarly, the SBBRs feel that their Rasta identity makes them a part of a larger community not based on nationality, but a global one based on a shared sense of spiritual Blackness.

6 His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I was an emperor of Ethiopia. Rastas believe that he is divine: the embodiment of the Messiah, the second coming of Christ.

7 Later in this article, I will address why I use Black and African together.

8 Boricua is another term for Puerto Rican, referencing the archipelago's precolonial name: Borikén.

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1 Blackness with Borders

The need for a formulation of Blackness that extends past the borders of Puerto Rico by the SBBRS, I would argue, stems from the global nature of the Rastafari movement. My interlocutors unanimously agreed that anyone could be Rasta, many using the phrase "the whole world," with Judah describing Rastafari as "a call to all of humanity." I believe Rastafari's encompassing and universal quality led my interlocutors to abide by a more global construction of Blackness as well. In this section, I discuss how Blackness is typically addressed in Puerto Rico, and how these constructions constrain how the Rastas create and understand their own Black and African identities.

1.1 *Puerto Rican vs. Global Blackness*

Previous scholarship has addressed the limited manner in which formulations of Blackness in Puerto Rico have been discussed historically (Arroyo 2010; Godreau 2015; Rivera-Rideau 2013). Puerto Rican Blackness has been understood along a folkloric/urban axis, which is ideological rather than objectively true. "Folkloric Blackness" is historical in that it is exclusively located in the past and is static. It is emplaced[9] in such areas as Carolina, San Antón, and Loíza. "Urban Blackness" is contemporary and is emplaced in urban developments and housing projects or *caseríos*. It is stereotypically associated with violence, hypersexuality, and criminal activity. A crucial difference between these two forms is that while folkloric Blackness is a nationalized and accepted part of Puerto Rican history and identity, urban Blackness is not; the latter is widely regarded as contrary to the mainstream Whiteness prevalent in the rest of the island (Rivera-Rideau 2013). However, both forms are separated literally (geographically) and figuratively (ideologically) from Puerto Rican identity, which is constructed as more racially mixed, or Whitened (Rivera-Rideau 2013).

Throughout my period of fieldwork, I was repeatedly told to go to Loíza if I wanted to study Blackness and Black identity in Puerto Rico, as if it did not exist in other parts of the island. This widespread belief manages to construct the rest of Puerto Rico as well as contemporary Puerto Rican society as having little to no influence from an African past.[10] African heritage is erased, ne-

9 I adopt Rivera-Rideau's 2013 usage of emplacement to describe how different forms of Blackness are connected to specific places in Puerto Rico.

10 The contributions of West Africans to Puerto Rican culture has widely been believed to be limited to *bomba* and *plena* music and dance although they are credited for "working" the land, which helped build the island's economy (Godreau 2002).

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glected,[11] or purposefully denied. As a result, some scholars feel that "the little that is left of cultural traits inherited from Africa (when compared with Jamaica or Haiti) is not enough to support an active Africa-based ethnicity in Puerto Rico" (Alleyne 2005:125). The dominant practice of the elision of Blackness and the subordination of African contributions to Puerto Rican culture and history have been effective, whether by the ideology of *mestizaje*[12] or the emphasis of Spanish roots.

There are of course opponents to this Afro-erasure, and a growing number of Puerto Ricans are reclaiming African heritage and Black identities. They are rejecting the semantics surrounding Puerto Rican racial terminology in which they are given the labels of the supposedly less offensive and "softer" euphemisms such as *trigueño* or *moreno*.[13] Instead, they are opting to identify themselves as *negro*/Black, using the term to accentuate their personal and collective identity. Scholarship has addressed the increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans who prefer to identify themselves as *negro*.[14] Individuals are reproducing and celebrating Blackness through performance (food, dress, hair, festivals, language), art (music, dance, literature, visual art), marriage and romantic partners, speaking out against racism and racist practices, and through religious practice and Black pride. For the purpose of understanding how the SBBRS situate their own construction of Blackness, it is important to note that they consider the Blackness being reproduced and celebrated by their non-Rasta contemporaries to be specific to Puerto Rico or Afro-Puerto Rican. Practicing *espiritismo*,[15] dancing *bomba*, even eating *mofongo* can all be considered examples of celebrating Blackness and African roots in Puerto Rico. However, for the SBBRS, Puerto Rican Blackness is not expansive enough; they prefer a Blackness that is global.

11 Neglected especially by scholarship that has the skills and resources to investigate African heritage in Puerto Rico but chooses not to due to a lack of interest or to a desire to hide this history.

12 The notion of *mestizaje* or "mixing" is utilized to represent the national identity in Puerto Rico, understood as the union of the three races: European, African, and Indigenous. It is often used to disarm claims of systematic racism and discrimination while at the same time downplaying or erasing Blackness as part of the racial make-up on the island.

13 *Trigueño*—wheat-colored; *moreno*—Brown; *negro*—Black.

14 Bonilla-Silva 2010; Coleman Taylor 2019; Géliga Vargas et al. 2009; Godreau 2008; Hernández Hiraldo 2006; Jiménez Román 1996; Lloréns 2018; Ortiz García 2006; Quiñones Rivera 2006; Rivera 2002; Santiago-Valles 1995.

15 *Espiritismo* and *santeria* are italicized and in lowercase letter in accordance with *NWIG*'s house style.

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My research explores the manner in which the Rastafari community in Puerto Rico embodies an unexplored, more transnational, global formulation of Blackness. Unlike forms of Blackness that are rooted in Puerto Rico, the SBBRS' construction of a spiritual Blackness extends past Puerto Rico's borders into the wider Caribbean region, the African diaspora, and the African continent itself. In this sense, it is foreign as well as local. Their sense of a spiritual Blackness puts them in conversation with other Afro-diasporic groups in the Americas that affirm their Blackness/Africanness as well as other Rasta populations that celebrate a shared African identity. For them, spiritual Blackness decenters nationality in favor of a larger network comprised of different ethnic groups, creating an "imagined community" of Afro-descendants worldwide.

1.2 *The Limit of Puerto Rican Blackness*

During the early stages of presenting my research to peers and colleagues, a number of them would ask why my interlocutors were attracted to Rastafari and reggae when Puerto Rico already has widely recognized cultural elements that celebrate Blackness and African identity such as the religious system of *espiritismo* and *bomba* music. In a sense, they wanted to know why my interlocutors chose "foreign" expressions of Blackness instead of "local" ones. This question always made me uncomfortable, because it seemed that they were implying that my interlocutors were appropriating something that was not "theirs" instead of choosing a more appropriate, Puerto Rican option. The problematic insinuation of these comments provides insight into how nationalism is deployed against these expressions of Blackness by the SBBRS, and why they prefer a global-over-national understanding of Blackness. During a conversation with a Rasta, he mentioned how he often encounters people who wonder why the Puerto Rican Rastas would adopt "something from Jamaica," a country with which they have no ties.[16] His response is that they are actually embracing something from Africa, a continent from which they are all descended. Bembe supports this statement saying, "Rastafari is from Africa, it is not from Jamaica. Rastafari is from Africa, from Ethiopia, and we have a direct connection." Instead of addressing the issue of authenticity and the notion of "ours versus theirs," I will focus on why my interlocutors feel that Rastafari provides exactly what they are searching for.

The SBBRS find Puerto Rican-based constructions of Blackness and the existing racial cultural resources to be insufficient, generating the need to create a new configuration. They see themselves as focused more on connecting with

16 The same was said about Rastas in Jamaica who defined themselves as African.

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the African continent and the diaspora but consider others to be more nation-centric. Most agree that Rastafari has a direct connection to Africa but feel that *espiritismo* and *bomba y plena*, while African-derived, are Puerto Rican-based and, therefore, too limiting. Kingly, who initially explored *bomba* and *santería*, details how when he discovered Rastafari, he felt a more profound connection with Africa. León, whose skin tone fits within the categorization of "*canela*,"[17] finds that Rastafari is unique in that it gives him a much deeper connection to Africa by providing him with "an African country" (meaning Ethiopia) as a homeland to feel connected to. He is especially attracted to how Rastafari also offers him a Black God to worship, which is incredibly important to him as a self-identifying Black man. He goes on to say that Rastafari "goes deeper" because it connects him to other Africans. Solomon explains, "They have already identified *bomba y plena* as Black Puerto Rican music. They have not identified it as African music or linked it to any place in Africa." He uses the example of *bomba*, which is very much a Puerto Rican phenomenon but even then, it is mostly located in very specific regions within Puerto Rico. To further elicit his point, Solomon clarifies that *espiritismo* and *bomba y plena* music are Black Puerto Rican, but Rastafari is Black African and global. Essentially, these Puerto Rican-based forms of Blackness are not considered "enough" for my interlocutors. By their nature of being "Puerto Rican," they do not offer a wide enough scope, unlike Rastafari which they feel provides a direct link to Africa and the African diaspora.

The SBBRS consider their understanding and embodiment of Blackness to be different from other Black-identifying Puerto Ricans. Charles Price highlights that for Rastas this process of becoming Black often involves an awareness that the manner in which they understand their Blackness differs from other Black-identifying individuals in their communities. In his work, he addresses how Black Jamaican Rastas "demarcated themselves from other Black Jamaicans through conspicuous 'us-them' boundaries signified through cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, symbolic, ideological, and phenotypic expressions" (Price 2009:102). The Puerto Rican Rastas are similar, signaling that they have a more knowledgeable and global understanding of Blackness, which ties to Price's argument that Rastas believe they "see/know" things that others are blind to[18] due to the enlightenment achieved by embracing Rastafari

17 Literally, cinnamon; Brown-skinned.

18 Examples are acknowledging the oppression they have faced, which was previously unnoticed due to miseducation, as well as seeing through falsehoods such as the notion that Christ is White (Price 2009:136, 165).

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(Price 2009). My interlocutors feel that becoming Rasta has enabled them to decolonize their minds,[19] which involves an inherent belief that others around them have been unable to do the same.

Throughout my research, I got the impression that a few of the SBBRS felt they had a deeper understanding of race and Blackness than their Puerto Rican contemporaries. For example, I found out about a community meeting being held that focused on the racism Black men face in Puerto Rico. I was planning to attend and asked one of my interlocutors if he had an interest in going with me since he knew one of the organizers. He declined, explaining that as Rastas, they know about racism and discuss it constantly, implying that he saw no need to attend this meeting. I received similar feedback when I asked a few of my interlocutors if they were interested in attending Las Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol, a three-day religious and folkloric festival in honor of Saint James in Loíza that is characterized as celebrating Afro-Puerto Rican roots. None of the ones I asked seemed interested and declined the invitation. While the SBBRS claim dedication to and interest in all forms of Blackness across the globe, I was surprised that some seemed rather indifferent to more local forms. Is their Blackness then truly global if they do not show the same amount of enthusiasm toward the Puerto Rican variety?

According to the SBBRS, they celebrate Blackness in a manner different, perhaps even deeper, from other Puerto Ricans. León describes how most Puerto Ricans hardly celebrate Blackness and African heritage, at least publicly. They find that the celebration of Blackness in Puerto Rico is limited to a romanticized past and often occurs in very specific locations and types of events such as Loíza's Las Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol or during *bomba y plena* shows. Due to this, they interpret the celebrations of Blackness in Puerto Rico to be restricted to examples strictly from the island. For example, Bembe explains that in Puerto Rico, Black figures specifically from the island are celebrated while among Rastas they will also commemorate Haile Selassie I, Marcus Garvey, and other Black figures from abroad. Jacob says that unlike others in Puerto Rico, Rastas celebrate their Blackness in "day-to-day living" instead of doing so only during specific occasions. Gabriel agrees with this point, stating that Rastas celebrate Blackness all year long. He reiterates, "Rastafari is always giving thanks for his Blackness and for his African heritage from when he wakes up until he goes to bed." According to Solomon, "No one in the world celebrates Blackness like Rastas." He describes how even White Rastas celebrate Blackness because that is a part of Rastafari: praising Blackness and the African origins of

19 The notion of "decolonizing the mind" is an important aspect of Rastafari.

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all mankind. Kingly states, "I think nobody in Puerto Rico more than the Rastafari movement is moving or fighting for the true objectives of Blackness that is a return to Africa, be it mental or physical."[20] The SBBRs see themselves and their community as acknowledging, embodying, and rejoicing in their Blackness and African heritage more passionately than those around them.

2 Spiritual Blackness

The SBBRs argue that non-Rasta Black Puerto Ricans are too nationalistic in their construction and understanding of their Blackness, in that their Blackness is much too bound to being Boricua and that it centers Puerto Rico. It is common among Rastas "to assert a strong black identity within and beyond national borders" (Suomahoro 2007:39). Their broad construction of Blackness, which creates this imagined global Black community, is defined by the shared belief of the significance and essentiality of freedom. Scholarship has addressed the impact of colonialism on people of the African diaspora, notably the internalization among subjugated groups of their colonization and oppression, which can be remedied by self-liberation (Fanon 1967; Freire 1970). Price (2009) argues that this liberation is achieved through identity transformation. I address the importance of the concept of freedom among Rastas and how the endeavor to forge self-liberation ties into the identity transformation they undergo to identify as spiritually Black.

Identity formation is a fluid and dynamic process, and as people move through life, their identities shift as they take on new roles, acquire different reference groups, and pursue new goals. Such changes are perceived as "normal" although sometimes they can be seen as "dramatic." People change from student to teacher, single to partnered, child to parent. All of my interlocutors underwent a process to come to identify as Rasta. This transformation has resulted in each of them creating a closer bond with the African continent and diaspora, even though not all of them identify as Black/African. The following section focuses on those who do see themselves as spiritually Black, what this identification means for them, and how this transformation meant purposefully taking on a stigmatized identity. Nevertheless, they do not consider doing so as a sacrifice (especially compared to earlier generations of Rastafari) since

20 Original in Spanish: *Pienso nadie en Puerto Rico más que el movimiento Rastafari está moviendo o peleando por los objetivos de la verdad de la negritud que es retornar a África, sean esta mental o físico*.

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it allowed them to "see/know" the truth and to put them on the path to self-liberation. This sense of emancipation could be the key to understanding why they would forgo "privilege" to welcome "stigma" instead.

2.1 *Embracing the Stigma of Blackness*

A number of my interlocutors told me about a community of Rastas in Vieques, the small island municipality off the east coast of Puerto Rico. When I arrived with a friend and had spoken with a few locals, I was instructed to find a Rasta who grows and supplies many of the ingredients a nearby restaurant uses from his farm located in a ravine. Makonen is a middle-aged man with graying dreadlocks, who came from the British West Indies. He greeted us warmly and invited us to sit with him and talk. I explained the purpose of my visit and he said, "Rastafari is an African culture created for the Black race as a means of uplifting us from bondage. It is universal, but it was meant to help the Black race out of bondage." As he took us on a tour of his farm he mentioned that to many people, being Black is a negative, but Rastafari "flips it": being Black is an advantage.

The SBBRs identify themselves as *negro* in what I consider to be a politicized and spiritual manner, as an implication of their own radical politics and as an example of turning stigma into a positive. The SBBRs have expanded how *negro* is defined in Puerto Rico, because they use it to describe a variety of skin tones, hair textures, and phenotypical features. Some of them, whom others would likely classify as *trigueño*, *mulato*, *jabao*, or even *blanco*, are directly opposed to these categorizations and prefer to identify themselves as *negro*. By choosing to identify as such, they are not only aware of but also willing to take on a stigmatized identity by "becoming Black." What do they gain from identifying as Black, when they have the ability not to? Why reject their privilege in place of stigma?

Due to how Blackness is defined in Puerto Rico, all of the SBBRs have the social privilege to identify themselves as non-Black, and more importantly, most could pass[21] for non-Black.[22] For this reason, I consider them to have the "choice" to select Blackness, especially in a place where a conceptual Black/non-Black racial dichotomy is a prevalent cultural frame. While the SBBRs

21 "Pass" is a charged word that is not the most accurate term to describe how my interlocutors could claim a non-Black identification and not be challenged by society.

22 This passing for non-Black, of course, would be easier for some than others and it is objective. Some of them could easily pass for White, while others could claim an intermediate category such as *trigueño* (although this might involve cutting their hair in order to embody a more mixed look for those of a darker complexion).

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do recognize that Blackness is stigmatized in Puerto Rico, they feel a sense of power in identifying as such, which I argue is the result of "self-elevation" (Goffman 1963; Price 2009). Price defines self-elevation as "a stigmatized group creating a rationale for their normality or even transcendence" (Price 2009:107). This process allows the SBBRS to accept and celebrate their stigmatized identity, because it provides them with a sense of spiritual, intellectual, and emotional potency that they would not have received had they denied their Blackness. "Rastafari treated stigma as a sign of status. They subverted the stigma stamped upon Blackness and valorized Black identity, history, and culture" (Price 2009:227). In fact, many feel that their Blackness is stigmatized since outsiders have not been able to obtain this sense of power for themselves because they are still prisoners of Babylon.[23]

The ability to even have a choice is a privilege, especially since it involves willingly taking on a stigmatized identity. My interlocutors, due to their embodiment of a Rasta identity and the physical and performative dimension of this identity expression, face discrimination within Puerto Rican society. They are assumed to sell drugs, are chastised as being unclean and lazy, and are often denied job opportunities due to their appearance. However, even though it would involve compromising their very identity, for most of my interlocutors, this discrimination is potentially avoidable (in a way unavailable to others who lack that privilege). To illustrate this point, I want to discuss an event that occurred as Kingly and I were walking around Old San Juan. Kingly, whose complexion would be described as *triqueño claro*,[24] had recounted how difficult it was for him to find work despite having a graduate degree. Understandably upset, he exclaimed in a moment of frustration, "I have to be blonde and blue-eyed to get a job here." Just as he said this, a woman passing by (who was *blanca*,[25] with blonde hair, and business casual attire) told him that what he needed to do was remove his turban and cut all his hair (dreadlocks and beard) to get a job. Kingly, seeming a bit taken aback, stopped in his tracks and stared at me almost in disbelief. He was not talking to her and yet she felt the need to boldly interrupt us to critique his appearance. He laughed it off and said to me as we kept moving, "That's the problem. We need to change the mentality and the stereotype." This exchange was fascinating to witness, and it deserves unpacking. First, Kingly cites the reason for his difficulty in finding employment as a racial issue, thus his claim that he needed "blonde hair and blue eyes" to find work. The passerby, after seeing him for a mere few seconds, decides that

23 Babylon is the term for Western, mainstream commercialistic society.

24 Literally, wheat-colored; light brown.

25 White, fair skin.

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Kingly does not need to be "White" per se to find work, but to remove the visible markers of Rastafari/otherness[26] that he displays: his turban and the hair on both his scalp and face (although I would argue that her suggestions do implicate a "Whitening" of Kingly's appearance). For a number of my interlocutors, their dreadlocks, facial hair, and attire are the only factors that "other" them; each of these can be easily removed. Some have mentioned how cutting their dreadlocks would provide them with more work opportunities. Therefore, their stigmatized identities are in a sense, brought upon themselves. But why would they willingly accept this stigma? They would argue that there is something much greater to gain in doing so.

In line with Price's discussion of how Rastas credit themselves for being able to "see/know" what others are blind to or ignorant of, many of my interlocutors believe that in becoming Rasta, they searched for and discovered their truth (Price 2009). As a result, they were able to undo years of miseducation, allowing them to not only accept and celebrate their Blackness, but also to be especially aware of the reality of racism and prejudice rampant in Puerto Rican society. They claim that by acknowledging this reality and accepting the stigmatized identification of Blackness, they were able to free their minds from mental enslavement, liberating themselves from the bonds of Babylon. Price argues that it is through this identity transformation that Rastas are able to achieve liberation from internalized oppression, which involves "resocialization and reeducation to positively define and evaluate Blackness, Black history, and Black culture" (Price 2009:106). It is the concept of freedom, freedom from Babylon, from racial and religious oppression, from a Eurocentric mindset that tries to teach them to abhor themselves for their Blackness, that unites these Puerto Rican Rastas with Rastas from all over the world.

2.2 *The Essentiality of Freedom among Rastafari*

Once, on a trip back from harvesting some *higüera*[27] to carve into accessories for sale, León looked out on the highway, watching the numerous cars pass by, the drivers undoubtedly on their way to work. He glanced up at the sun, and stretched out his arms as if to take it all in. *Machete*[28] in one hand and fresh *higüera* in the other he exclaimed, "Look at them, rushing to work for Babylon. We work for ourselves! We are free!"

26 It is not clear whether she was able to identify Kingly as a Rasta from his appearance. The Rastas with whom I spoke have told me that they have been mistaken for "hippies" and "Muslims" (those who wear turbans).

27 A calabash gourd.

28 A broad blade often used in agriculture.

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A few months later, Ezequiel invited me to his home to hang out and meet some of his friends. During a tour of his home and surrounding property, he first showed me his herb garden on the enclosed porch and then the numerous fruits and vegetables growing in the backyard. I expressed my surprise at how much he grew. He laughed and said he also has a water garden at his parent's house. While we were in the backyard, he told me about his goal to live off the food he grows himself. We spent a few hours discussing various topics while he made fresh fruit smoothies and his girlfriend cooked us lentils and mashed potatoes. He brought out a conga and a guitar, which he was teaching himself to play. As he sat strumming on his guitar, I thought about his goals for self-sustainability and reliance. The food we had eaten all came from his gardens. He was teaching himself to play instruments and since their kitchen needed remodeling, they were doing it themselves.

I present these two examples from my fieldwork to illustrate how my interlocutors put a great deal of importance on self-sufficiency such as creating their own businesses and growing their own food, which has become a priority through their journey to Rastafari. They also value that do-it-yourself quality in others (including their friends and romantic partners). Independence and self-reliance are key features of Rastafari and Black nationalism, and my interlocutors consistently work toward separating themselves from Babylon. I had the opportunity to discuss this topic with Makeda when we both went to help Solomon translate his Spanish-language documentary about the life of Haile Selassie. On the way back from picking up some food, she describes their experience living on a farm and raising her children there. She explains that while she wants to expose her children to other facets of life in Puerto Rico, she fears how quickly Babylon can undo the years she spent teaching Rastafari principles to her children. When I was speaking with Makonen, I asked him if he saw a lot of Puerto Ricans becoming Rasta. He explained, "It's hard to be Rasta living in the city." He spoke of the importance of working the land and connecting with nature and the need for autonomy within Rastafari culture, but also said that living in a more urban environment forces you to "work for Babylon." While this might be more difficult for Rastas living on the "big" island, they are still attempting to do so. As León has explained to me, he detaches himself from "them," "their government," and "their society." That is why owning his own business is so essential to him. There is a definite sense of the importance of independence and self-sufficiency among Rastas. Some of my interlocutors such as Judah and Mateo farm, grow, and sell their produce as a means to support themselves and detach from Babylon. Younger Rastas such as Ezequiel are well on that path as well, growing a few crops but also planning to own their own farm and live off of the land.

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I went with León and his wife to Ponce for a reggae event where they would be selling merchandise and dreadlocking hair. They wanted to stay a night in the area since they had a few clients that they were going to meet the next day, so we camped out at a site. On the way there, we saw fireworks since it was the night before July 4. León exclaimed, "*Feliz Julio 4*! We're celebrating because we're really free! We're free from Babylon! I'm not talking about Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico is not free, they're still slaves, but we are free!"

3 Spiritually Black/Broadly African

In an interview, Ezequiel states, "In Puerto Rico … I do not know why, we deny the Black race … There is an idea that we are Spanish or something like that … descendants of Spain and that there were no Blacks." My interlocutors critique how vehemently some Puerto Ricans deny African heritage and downplay the presence of Africans in Puerto Rico's history and culture, insisting that Africa cannot be erased from Puerto Rico. To quote Gabriel, "That heritage cannot be denied. It cannot be denied."

In Puerto Rico, citing Africa as a source of heritage is common (although the influence is often deemed minimal), but acknowledging African ancestry is not an inherent declaration of being Black. Identifying African heritage yields cultural capital and enables people to use this claim as "proof" that Puerto Ricans cannot be racist, whereas identifying as Black carries a social stigma. For many Rastas, however, African heritage and Blackness go hand-in-hand. Rastafari provides a platform for my interlocutors to discover and embrace Africa and all things African. In doing so, many understand themselves as Black.

In claiming a spiritual Black identity, the SBBRS centralize Africa in their identity politics, unlike many other Puerto Ricans who consider African heritage to be marginal and insignificant. The belief that Ethiopia is the location of Zion in Rastafari ideology is largely responsible for the importance of the African continent among my interlocutors. In order to create closer bonds with their spiritual homeland, they utilize an ancestral connection by referencing Puerto Rico's history of enslaved West Africans. However, in an attempt to connect with Ethiopia, they are committing two rather complex actions that I would argue potentially defies their mission to spread knowledge about Africa: (1) they occasionally conflate "Black" and "African" and use the two interchangeably; and (2) at times, their construction of Africa homogenizes the continent.

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3.1 (*Re*)*claiming and* (*Re*)*centering Africa*

I was attempting to schedule a meeting with one of my interlocutors when he suggested we connect at the Playa Pa'l Pueblo coalition event, a reggae concert in Isla Verde, that was protesting the lease of a public beach to a hotel. Following the concert, a number of the Rastas in attendance decided to have a Nyabinghi drumming session after most of the crowd left. The atmosphere dramatically changed and became quite meditative. When they finished, people gathered around to discuss the protest and other events happening on the island. I said my goodbyes and started to walk back to the main road to catch the bus when I overheard Solomon mention that a band mate of his did not want to play at this event. Figuring it was none of my business, I continued to walk away when suddenly he revealed, "He said he didn't want to sing about Africa." Quickly, I turned around and went up to the group so I could hear what happened. Evidently the band mate was not comfortable with singing about Africa and the many Afrocentric themes that come up in Solomon's music. Solomon dismissed him by stating, "You know how people are. They don't claim Africa, they say 'I'm Boricua, I'm White.'" I was interviewing Solomon weeks later and after we finished, I asked him about this incident for him to explain further what had happened. He said that while his band mate is a reggae "fanatic" and knows a lot about the genre, he has begun to feel ridiculous singing about Africa and Blackness when he sees himself as White.

Rastas would critique the point of view of many Puerto Ricans who claim not to be of African descent, especially when they would utter in the same breath that racism cannot exist in Puerto Rico since the population came from the mixing of European, Taíno, and African roots. Judah criticizes Puerto Ricans who deny their Blackness in favor of a White identification, "Many people on the Census here in Puerto Rico conceptualize themselves as White, but it is not real." He goes on to explain that often Puerto Ricans stress European or Taíno roots, failing to recognize that much of Spain (and some would argue even Taíno and Arawak societies) was influenced by Africa. Gabriel simply points out that if someone wants to claim Whiteness, they have that right, but they have to realize "that they came from Africa and African heritage flows through the blood of a Boricua."

The tendency to downplay African heritage in Puerto Rico is at odds with the centrality that Africa holds in Rastafari culture. Afrocentrism is essential to the Rastafari movement. Africa is widely recognized as the ideological center, thus putting strong emphasis on ties between people of the diaspora and the "mother" continent, focusing on a shared identity and history (Barnett 2006). Many Rastas recognize the roots of Rastafari as not from Jamaica, but from Africa and more specifically Ethiopia. Ethiopia is especially significant due to

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the interpretation of numerous Bible verses, particularly "Princes come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God" (Psalms 68:31). Gabriel states, "no matter where you come from, the point of origin will always be Africa. The Black race will always be present in us and more here in Puerto Rico, and there is no doubt about that."

The significance that Africa holds among Rastas is clear, because they distinctly recognize their African roots as the most substantial and the most central. As a result, the Rastas in Puerto Rico reverse the hierarchical order implicit in their society of the three heritage groups that make up the island's history and identity, placing the African at the forefront, followed by the Taíno, and lastly the Spaniard. When I visited an organic market, I spoke with Judah at his stand. He explained to me that we are all human first, and that every Puerto Rican is a mix of three origins/ancestries (African, Taíno, and Spanish). However, he stressed that Puerto Ricans acquired much more from their African heritage and the least from the Spanish. The centrality of African roots in Puerto Rico is a common belief among many of the Rastas I spoke to. The continent is often referred to as *Mama Africa* and *la madre de la civilización* (the mother of civilization). One of my interlocutors (who does not identify as Black) has a tattoo that depicts Puerto Rico with its roots growing out of Africa. I had seen another wear a shirt that read "*Africa Habla En Mi*" (Africa speaks in me). Kingly and Mateo spoke to me numerous times about repatriation to the continent. At some point in our conversations, all of my interlocutors have stated that we all come from Africa. For these Rastas, their identity is much more situated in diaspora than nationalism. They do not reject their Puerto Ricanness, but their homeland is not on the island, but much further east. The following statement made by Solomon perfectly sums up why a number of my interlocutors emphasize Africa and do not stress a Puerto Rican nationalistic identity: "*No voy a cambiar un continente por una isla*" (I am not going to exchange a continent for an island).

The centrality of Africa in the Rasta mindset generates a level of frustration among my interlocutors with other Puerto Ricans who denigrate or deny African ancestry; they attribute this ignorance to miseducation and stubbornness. One of the main responses by my interlocutors to Puerto Ricans who deny being Black or of African descent is that they have to learn their history. According to Judah, "Well, they have to educate themselves more to understand the contributions of Blacks and Africans to humanity and civilization." Kingly points directly to the history of the enslavement of Africans in Puerto Rico for decades. How could anyone, knowing that history, deny having African ancestry? However, society, television, schools, and families have "brainwashed" many people to believe otherwise. Those who deny it apparently need to

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relearn this history and they will then discover their "origins" and "where they come from." My interlocutors shared this idea that "knowing where you come from" would ultimately result in more Puerto Ricans recognizing and celebrating their African heritage and Blackness. Mateo considers this to be "a blessing" for people to recognize who they are, know their ancestors, and say "I am Black."

3.2 *African vs. Black*

It was reading through the transcripts of interviews with Kingly that I realized that using the term "Black" is often inherently meant to signify African among the Rastas in Puerto Rico. He explained that as a Rasta, you are African. This is not to say that an individual's race or appearance changes by becoming Rasta, but that the mentality changes. By "knowing" the history and identifying with the cradle of civilization, you are taking on an African frame of mind; that is, your Africanness is a mental state. For many, honoring that African past involves identifying with it as well.

While Black and African are by no means synonymous, there is a reason I use these two terms together. I found that at times, many of my interlocutors were using the terms interchangeably or that the use of one inherently indicated the other. For example, Bembe explains, "It comes from Africa, that is, it is Black." This is to be expected considering the tendency of "equating the African continent with blackness" that is prevalent among Rastafari (Suomahoro 2007). Barnett addresses the importance of this conflation among Rastas, explaining that it is largely due to "the centrality of Africa in their world conception; that is the notion that Africa is the source or origin of all humanity; or at the very least the acceptance that all Black people are African (Ethiopian), despite their ethnic origins" (Barnett 2005:76). Therefore, they see no major difference between claiming to be Black and African. While Black and African signify different identities that are not always inherently linked, the two often coexist. A number of my interlocutors, in the process of reclaiming their African heritage, discovered their Blackness. This relates to Davis's description of Black identity among Hispanophone Caribbeans where he argues that it makes sense "to consider blackness as awareness of the African heritage rather than just the amount of melanin in the skin" (Davis 2009:35). He explains that this is especially rational given the reality of racial mixture and numerous racial categorizations in the Hispanophone Caribbean. For many Rastas, being Black and being African are "naturally" linked.

I did notice that during some of the interviews, it became evident that certain individuals were taking care to use the word "African" to describe their race, and not the word "Black." When I asked for their racial identity, some eagerly claimed Black while a few others seemed tentative before claiming

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African. It is important to note that each who hesitated had a fairer complexion. Theorist and researcher William E. Cross Jr. (1971) who focuses on Black identity development brings up an interesting point about how during the process to becoming Black, individuals are likely to experience anxiety concerning whether they are "Black enough." This likely applies to some of my interlocutors, who seemed hesitant to claim to be Black but selected African even though they consistently used the two terms interchangeably. I believe that among the SBBRS with a lighter complexion, claiming an African identity could be considered a "subtler" way of claiming a Black identity. I found that utilizing African as a label was a way to claim that same identity while acknowledging not having a stereotypically Black skin tone. Black and African were used in the same manner and to signify the same things, but the employment of these terms seemed a conscious choice at times. For example, a blonde, blue-eyed Rasta claiming to be Black would undoubtedly receive critiques or arguments against his racial self-identification. He does not "look" Black. He clearly does not fit the narrow Puerto Rican constructions of Blackness. Claiming to be African and/or of African descent however, is less jarring due to how Africa is already accepted as part of the trinity of ancestries that makes up the modern-day Puerto Rican. While this "loop-hole" of sorts might allow some of the SBBRS a more comfortable manner to express their Blackness, it is necessary to point out the problematic nature of relying on the conflation of Black and African when they do not mean the same thing.

Since the SBBRS would often use Black and African interchangeably, during our interviews I asked whether they felt that there was a difference between the two terms. Gabriel explains, "the difference is that 'Black' is a color and 'African' is your root, from where you came." For Jacob, African refers to the multitude of ethnic groups on the African continent while Black is a state of mind like Afrocentrism, which comes from within—"spiritually." Generally, while some have argued that the two signify different identities, they still believe the two are inherently linked since Africa is seen as the homeland of all Black people. Profeta Mateo explains why, especially among Rastas, the differentiation between the terms is not so significant. "There is no difference between Black and African because Africa is Black, the culture is Black, and Jah is Black."[29] He points out that the name of the major Bobo Ashanti church he is affiliated with in Jamaica is called the Ethiopia Africa Black International Congress, "Ethiopia, Africa, Black … you know? It is all the same to us."

29 Original in Spanish: *No hay diferencia entre negro y africano porque África es negra y la cultura es negra y Jah es negro*.

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3.3 *Homogenization of Africa*

In order to address my interlocutors' self-conception as Black/African, I should discuss their "reference group" first. Reference group refers to the group of people that individuals connect with in some way. These individuals may either already be a part of their reference group or they aspire to be so. The individual's performance (both behavioral and appearance) is often compared in relation to the reference group. As mentioned earlier, my interlocutors have stressed that Rastafari comes from Africa (specifically Ethiopia) and not Jamaica. For this reason, I would argue that their reference group would mainly be Ethiopian people and a generalized imaginary of Africans. While they highly value the knowledge, wisdom, and culture brought by "Rasta Elders" from the Caribbean islands such as Jamaica, Trinidad, and Saint Vincent, I did not find that they tried to emulate or represent aspects of the cultures from these islands except for the use of "Iyaric" or "dread talk"[30] (usually in a Jamaican accent). Instead, when discussing their preferences, behaviors, choices, and physical appearance, they reference the African continent. This explains why my interlocutors choose to emphasize their African heritage and Blackness as a way to demonstrate and verify a deeper and stronger connection to their reference point.

Cross (2012) and Price (2018) discuss modes in which Black racial identity, or Blackness, functions. Here I focus on two of the modalities: bonding and bridging.[31] Bonding is the connection and positive relationships between Black individuals and communities based on the shared experience of being Black. It is the force that creates the "imagined Black community." Bridging, specifically what Cross (2012) terms as "within-group bridging," refers to Black individuals who come from vastly different cultural backgrounds,[32] bridging the divide

30 Due to the colonial obstruction of the use and spread of the original languages of the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, Rastas consider English to be a colonial language imposed on their ancestors. As a result, the dialect of "Iyaric" or "dread talk" was created as a way to cut ties with Babylon. Iyaric involves modified vocabulary from English that better suits Rastafari culture and beliefs and what they consider to be the true meaning of words. For example, instead of "to understand," many Rastas say "to overstand" due to "over" being a better position to symbolize their enlightenment than being "under." "Oppress" is changed to "downpress" to symbolize how the action attempts to keep people down. Instead of "dedication" they say "livication" because they associate "dedication" with death (dead-ication) and prefer to substitute the first part with life/live. The negative connotations of parts of certain words are transformed to accurately represent Rastafari's concept of a "positive vibration" (Kebede & Knottnerus 1998).

31 Bonding and bridging are frequently used with regard to social capital. The concept of bonding/bridging social capital was discussed by Putnam 2000, though he credits the notion to Gittell & Vidal 1998.

32 Price (2018) argues this could be applied to Black individuals from different socioeco-

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and bonding over a shared Black identification even though their experiences as Black folk could vary greatly. For example, a Black person from the United States and one from the Caribbean could use their shared Black identity as a way to *bridge* their differences and *bond* over this shared Blackness.

It is through Blackness and a generalized African ancestry that the SBBRS are able to connect with their Ethiopian reference group. My interlocutors are using this aspect of their genetic heritage, this shared Blackness and Afrodiasporic identity, to *bridge* the continental divide and connect to Ethiopia. This allows them to *bond* with their reference group based on a shared experience of being Black and of African descent. Not only this, but I would argue that there is also an intention to bond with other groups that share their reference group, namely other Rastas from around the world. Dawit explains, "We are part of the Black race and we carry inside that flavor, strength, mentality, and respect for the ideas of the African who worked and suffered in these lands."

Rastafari promotes a perspective in which Africa is centralized. While none of my interlocutors are nationally African themselves, nor have they been to the continent, they rely on the feature they do possess to gain a sense of intimacy with the land their belief system holds with such high regard: their African heritage. In terms of links to Africa, the Rastas in Puerto Rico have an interestingly different point of reference from many Puerto Ricans. While there are increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans who celebrate their African ancestry, it is usually understood as a generalized African lineage (likely West African from enslaved ancestors). When imagining Africa, there are rarely concrete ties to or holdovers from specific cultures since those were severed by the Atlantic slave trade. Johnson discusses how pan-African or African diasporic identifications "have no reference to an idealized homeland or any aspiration of return" (Johnson 2007:52). Rastas, however, have explicit, though imagined, ties to Ethiopia.[33] While it is unlikely that any of them are of direct Ethiopian descent, they still feel a strong connection to the country and employ that in creating and celebrating their African identity.

These Puerto Rican Rastas who are descended from enslaved West Africans construct ties to Ethiopia, a country where they likely have no genetic or ancestral ties, by relying on a homogenized construction of Africa as well as an essentialized, potentially folkloric, image of Ethiopia. From one perspective, it is difficult to avoid this homogenization since they greatly desire forming a

nomic groups as well. Both Price (2018) and Cross (2012) discuss how bridging can also be applied to people who form bonds with others of another race.

33 Ethiopia is considered to be Zion, the homeland where many aim to repatriate to.

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connection with Africa but are unable to discern which specific countries or cultures are part of their personal or familial history. Rastafari gives them a country and culture to embrace. On the other hand, the implications of this oversimplification of Africa, and of defining Africa as Black, erase the diversity of the continent and the foreign lineages. Not to mention the possibility that this imagined connection with Ethiopia may very well be one-sided. There are examples of an awareness of this possibility such as when Kingly claims, "We are African, but some Africans do not know about us." One insinuation is that Rastas, in this case, have a distorted view of Africans and potentially rely on stereotypes and generalizations. I am hesitant to assert this claim since I have had a number of discussions with my interlocutors about the homogenization of the African continent in the West, especially in the media. It was during such discussions especially, that my background became relevant (my father is from Egypt), because they would point out the diversity of the continent from Egypt to Ethiopia to Nigeria. While they clearly understand Africa's complexity, their method of connecting to Ethiopia by emphasizing distant West African ancestry to relate to an East African country (although this is the case with Jamaican and other West Indian Rastas as well) is ambiguous. Rastas call out the problematic tendency to homogenize Africa as a way to demonstrate that they are knowledgeable of its history and diversity. And yet, it also benefits them to paint the continent with a broad stroke to create a unified African identity as a way to grant them a level of authenticity when claiming a connection with Ethiopia.

4 Conclusion

In Puerto Rico, as is the case in a number of Latin American and Caribbean countries, African ancestry does not necessarily connote Blackness (Jiménez Román 1996). Despite the prevalence of the concept of *las tres raices*, which promotes the idea that all Puerto Ricans share Spanish, Taíno, and West African ancestry, for many Puerto Ricans, having distant African heritage does not suggest that they are African themselves nor racially Black. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 76 percent of Puerto Rico's population self-identifies as White.[34] The SBBRS, however, completely disregard this tendency to separate Blackness from African ancestry, instead choosing to bind the two. But even this

34 Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, Puerto Rico, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/puerto-rico/, accessed 5 February 2021.

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is not enough. The existing cultural resources in Puerto Rico are considered insufficient, resulting in a need to create a new configuration, that of spiritual Blackness. Their divergent understanding of Blackness as spiritual, a global phenomenon, stems from their identity transformation to Rastafari, which liberates them from existing conceptions of Blackness in Puerto Rico. Spiritual Blackness not only extends past Puerto Rican borders toward the African continent, but also past constructions of Blackness in Puerto Rico suggested by previous scholarship. The SBBRS seek a Black community that understands their experience. Not finding the resources available to them in Puerto Rico, they have branched out creating an imagined, global Black community that they feel connected to through their shared spirituality.

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