Clinton A. Hutton, Michael A. Barnett, D.A. Dunkley & Jahlani A.H. Niaah (eds.)


This volume includes 13 papers presented at a symposium convened in 2011 by the University of the West Indies to mark the 113th birthday of Leonard P. Howell, a figure now widely regarded as the “first Rasta.” These offerings underscore the extent to which the Jamaican establishment has embraced a once-feared group of revolutionary “cultists”—now turned disciples of an internationally recognized spirituality—that has, to a great extent, put Jamaica on the global map. A number of the contributors break new ground by introducing fresh source materials or developing new perspectives on the Rastafari movement and its culture. Perhaps most significant are chapters by Clinton Hutton, James Robertson, D.A. Dunkley, Jahlani Niaah, and Petrine Archer.

Hutton, a political scientist, draws on what might be called “assemblage aesthetics”—a recombinant sensibility which he views as characteristic of the larger African diaspora—to assess Howell’s ingenuity as founder of the movement. Weaving together strands of form, symbol, and practice from diverse sources—Garveyism, Revival, Pocomania, Kumina, Hinduism, Ethiopianist thought—he argues that Howell’s contribution to the Rastafari genesis was that of a cultural _bricoleur_ who successfully crafted a reordered Jamaican cosmology.

Both Robertson and Dunkley bring to light new materials in their chapters. Robertson draws on the surviving notes taken by members of the Jamaica constabulary who “audited” Howell’s meetings, monitoring them for seditious statements. His close reading of these documents provides insight into the developing substance of Howell’s initial preaching and his critique of colonial Jamaican society. This includes his missionizing during the 1930s and the first years of his tenure at an economically independent community called Pinnacle created by Howell and his followers. Through his analysis he challenges other scholars of the movement to reflect more critically on the continuities of Howellite thought and practice sustained by present-day communicants. Dunkley provides something of a parallel exploration of Howell’s early years, arguing that Garvey’s departure from Jamaica in the mid-1930s left a leadership vacuum with respect to the peasantry that was successfully exploited by Howell. He also explores Howell’s “missing years” (1958–81), that is the post-Pinnacle period during which Howell’s influence on the movement is widely held to have been negligible. Dunkley provides a range of interesting details on these years including that fact that Howell continued to be harassed by authorities.
for the sale of ganja. The most important event of this period, however, was the state visit of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1977, and some will likely find Dunkley's explanation of Howell's absence from the scene on this occasion to be unconvincing. Based on testimony he received from three of Howell's followers in 2011, he argues that Howell decided not to make an appearance because he was critical of the government's attempts to politically manipulate the Rasta affinity for Africa. This explanation, fashioned four decades on, reads more like a secondary elaboration for Howell's motivations at the time. By 1966 it was, after all, the case that the torch of Rastafari protest for repatriation had already been passed to a new cohort of leaders who, by cloaking the movement in new codes of cultural expression, had broken with Howell and other leaders of his generation.

Niaah, a Rastafari himself, approaches Howell as a traveler-prophet, teacher, community organizer, and entrepreneur who served to reconstruct an ethos of African-Jamaican manhood, incorporating and transcending Garvey's ethic of racial pride, collective effort, and African unity. In this, he makes a significant contribution to the unevenly developed focus on gender in the literature, one devoted almost exclusively to the movement's subordination of women. Niaah's ongoing work will undoubtedly move others toward a fuller exploration of the multivalent codes of Rasta masculinity and the contexts in which these codes serve to empower or subvert the agency of women within the culture.

In her contribution, the late Petrine Archer-Straw draws attention to the interplay between the discursive and the visual in the formative period of the movement, a focus long ignored in the literature. Pointing to the way Howell used the now famous “Prince Regent” photograph of the Emperor in his early preaching, her chapter strengthens Hutton's notion of an assemblage aesthetic by illustrating how Howell incorporated other elements of visual culture in his missionizing, including East Indian and Masonic sources. Her work will hopefully move others to explore some of the broader aspects of visual culture inspired by Rastafari both at home and abroad.

The balance of chapters—by Michael Barnett, Christopher Charles, K’adamawe K’nife (et al.), Louis Moyston, and Miguel Lorne—as well as Hutton's interview of Monty and Billbert Howell (sons of Howell who grew up at Pinnacle) serve to round out new information on the ministry of Howell and other “first evangelists,” making this a noteworthy contribution to the expanding multidisciplinary literature on the movement.

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