Social Death and Rastafari Reason

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Introduction

Orlando Patterson’s substantial oeuvre has been regularly revisited and reviewed. However, the conscription to Black Studies of his most influential concept, “social death”, has proceeded with little interrogation of his wider research program. This state of affairs stands in stark contrast to the field of History, wherein numerous debates have been had over the conceptual formations garnered from Patterson’s magnus opus, *Slavery and Social Death*. Ula Taylor and Cherod Johnson ask students of Black Studies whether they “read beyond the first chapters or the legendary essays” of famous scholars; Sara-Maria Sorentino directs the same question towards Patterson: “is [he] read well? Save for the first few pages of the book’s introduction, is he read at all?”

Regardless of how deeply Black Studies scholars might have read Patterson there exists a tendency towards shallow citational practices in influential texts wherein social death is deployed for heavy lifting. Take, for instance, *Scenes of Subjection*, wherein Saidiya Hartman’s consultation with *Slavery and Social Death* occurs principally in a footnote that affirms a connection between the concept of “mortified flesh” and “social death”. When Frank Wilderson admits that *Slavery and Social Death* functions “as a ur-text” for his own work, it is accompanied by no sustained engagement with Patterson’s texts. Jared Sexton likewise references *Slavery and Social Death* and bemoans the debates that make a “caricature of the concept”, yet only briefly refers to Patterson so as to make an affirmative commitment to living a black social life “under the shadow of social death”. Meanwhile, in discussing the

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idea of “terminological dehiscence”, Fred Moten briefly aligns Patterson’s conception of social death with Hannah Arendt’s separation of the social and the political but without mapping the procedure.

In distinction to these attenuated textual and citational engagements, Sorentino comprehensively works through Slavery and Social Death. Her aim is to consider concepts not as “merely discursive constructs or static ideas” but rather as emanative of power from “political situations, social conditions, and historical trajectories”. Sorentino’s valuable and audacious examination of the conceptual motility of “social death” as part of what might be called a zeitgeist leaves unfinished a humbler investigation: the political situations, social conditions and historical trajectories particular to Patterson’s own intellectual journey from the late 1950s up to the publication of his most famous book in 1981.

This, of course, was an era which saw the professional inauguration of Black Studies emanating from freedom struggles in North America and liberations struggles worldwide. Yet investigations of Patterson’s early intellectual development have mostly been undertaken outside of Black Studies, primarily in his “home” discipline of sociology. For instance, Fiona Greenland and George Steinmetz have connected Patterson’s first novels to his sociological analysis of slavery and philosophy of freedom. And Steinmetz has provocatively labelled Patterson the first “postcolonial sociologist”, calling attention to the fact that his intellectual evolution takes place within the British imperial field of sociology and especially social anthropology. Still, as valuable as this work is, it does not accommodate a particular ethos of Black Studies which impels us to contextualize struggles over knowledge formation as part of struggles for, against and over Black community.

What politics might be emanative of the concept of social death if we situate the early Patterson not only within an imperial academy but also within its contested black spaces of post-emancipation independence? In this article I focus on his early works leading up to Slavery and Social Death and consider how they laid a path towards his celebrated concept. While there is a necessary engagement with biography in my engagement, I am less interested in individual intention (or moral judgment) and more interested in excavating structural exclusions and responses to those exclusions that are of relevance to Black Studies. I demonstrate how Patterson’s intellectual path was shaped by his interactions with the urbanizing Rastafari movement around the cusp of Jamaica’s independence. But I also argue that in his evaluation of the movement Patterson denuded Rastafari of all reason.

In general, this article aims to interrogate the politics implicated in particular concept formations and the ways in which, through the process of conceptualization, those politics inform our

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10 Sorentino, “The Sociogeny of Social Death.”
11 Fiona Greenland and George Steinmetz, “Orlando Patterson, His Work, and His Legacy: A Special Issue in Celebration of the Republication of Slavery and Social Death,” Theory and Society 48, no. 6 (December 1, 2019): 785–97.
diasporic confrontations with what Hartman calls the afterlife of slavery. The purpose of the article is to make the case that, as a concept, Patterson’s “social death” emanates out of imperial knowledge production, specifically, a concern for pathology inducing black migrations into urban spaces. I propose that the efficacy of social death as an explanatory concept must also be adjudicated with the rationalities of those black movements for self-determination that have been deemed pathological rather than reasonable. The counter-rationality that I am concerned with in this article is what I will call “Rastafari reason”.

I begin by drawing out the political and intellectual contexts in which Patterson began his studies, respectively, the challenge posed by the urban Rastafari movement to Jamaican independence, and imperial social anthropology with its functionalist approach to order. I then demonstrate how these contexts deeply inform Patterson’s early writings on slavery, resistance, and freedom, such that commitments to black community and claims to African redemption, as held by Rastafari, are evidence of pathology rather than reasoned responses to political change, despite evidence of said reason. I then embed Patterson’s aporia over Rastafari reason within a narrative of black migration that he sources from US urban sociology. I show how Patterson combines US and British sociological traditions to produce a set of propositions whereby black populations are said to experience a series of existential breaks with the past across slavery, emancipation and urbanization, but wherein a white-Christian authored patriarchal family remains the norm of healthy development. I then detail how Patterson’s eschatology of slavery – his conception of social death and philosophy of modern freedom - is deeply structured by these propositions.

Subsequently, I re-narrate the same Rastafari movement that Patterson engages with through Rastafari histories and frameworks of self-understanding that commit to anti-colonial self-determination. By way of this reasoning, I sketch out a Rastafari philosophy of freedom which is remarkably cognate to Patterson’s yet retains a commitment to black community and African redemption across post-emancipation and urban migrations. This reconstruction of black movement through Rastafari reason undermines the sociological and philosophical premises and propositions on which Patterson’s eschatology of slavery rests. I finish by claiming that Patterson’s conceptualization of social death epistemologically and normatively delegitimizes the non-patriarchal non-filial familiarity with which Rastafari is comprised and through which the movement is energized to confront the afterlives of slavery. I suggest how my argument might hold ramifications for the mobilization of “social death” in Black Studies.

Social Anthropology and Rastafari

Patterson came of intellectual age in the late 1950s/early 1960s and at a moment in Jamaican history where the most salient challenge to colonial (and post-colonial) governing logics came from impoverished Rastafari. In contrast to the white and brown middle classes, the Rastafari movement embraced blackness as a sacred resource by which to repair humanity and seek reparative justice through the modality of repatriation to Ethiopia/Africa instead of rehabilitation in Jamaica regardless of its political independence. Both society and government responded by shaming and violently disciplining Rastafari as “blackheart” people.

The challenge that Rastafari posed at independence was magnified by Cold War politics and the Cuban revolution. In 1960, Reverend Claudius Henry, professing to represent the movement, wrote a letter to Fidel Castro imploring for his help in confronting the “oppressors” in Jamaica. Henry was trialed

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for treason and convicted. In response, Henry’s son, a US ex-marine, travelled to Jamaica and established a military training camp in the hills above Kingston. After ambushing and killing two British soldiers from the Royal Hampshire Marines, Reynold Henry was convicted and executed. 

While the Rastafari movement was only tangentially involved in this particular confrontation, it did sour the political mood against them further. So, in the same year, Mortimo Planno and other notable Rastafari requested the University College of West Indies to undertake research into the violence suffered by them as well as their demands for repatriation. Arthur Lewis, Principal of the University College at the time, directed certain faculty to undertake an examination of the movement with an eye to its rehabilitation. However, in 1963, the year after independence, police with government support launched a deadly crackdown on Rastafari in Montego Bay after a dispute over land.

It could be said, then, that Jamaican independence pivoted in good part on the violent discipling of the Rastafari movement. And notably, this contention was mediated through Jamaica’s academy.

In 1959 Patterson began his undergraduate degree at the University College in economics with a concentration in sociology. He became interested in Claudius Henry even before entering university and during his studies would occasionally visit the Dungle (Dung Hill), which at that point in time formed a nucleus for the 15-20,000 Rastafari congregated in Kingston’s overcrowded informal settlements. In fact, Patterson claims that he had more experiential knowledge of Rastafari than anyone else at the University College and remembers being disappointed that he was not asked to take part in researching the Rastafari report. He graduated in 1962, the year of Jamaican independence.

Sociology, at the time of Patterson’s academic induction, was an imperial field binding colonial colleges such as his undergraduate institution to metropolitan institutions such as the London School of Economics (LSE), where he undertook his PhD. In Britain’s imperial academy, social anthropology was ascendent within sociology. Its functionalist approach proposed that patterns of behavior gained their meaning by reference to the function they served for the reproduction of the social group. Behaviors that did not seem to serve the meta-function of maintaining an existing social order were pathologized – judged to be abnormal.

During the inter-war period, the high-point of social anthropology’s influence, the Colonial Social Science Research Council identified such pathologies principally in a concern for the impact of colonial development on the “changing native” in southern Africa. Bronislaw Malinowski, perhaps the most

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19 see Steinmetz, “A Child of the Empire.”
influential social anthropologist of the era, warned of the destabilizing nature of native migration from rural and tribal milieus into white-European urban townships and commercial centers. The migrating native, argued Malinowski, left the ascriptive life of the tribe and was rudely introduced to the associational life of white settlers. Some of these natives would be indoctrinated via formal education into the superiority of European civilization but would then be denied full incorporation into its associational life due to colonial color bars in various occupations. Caught in between lives, this native, claimed Malinowski, would craft a reactionary politics, one which combined universalist relations *a la* associational mode with the ascriptive order of tribal life. These combinations induced in the “changing native” pathological ideologies, such as black nationalism, which challenged the integrity of imperial order.

All of Patterson’s mentors at the University College and at the LSE were either connected to the Colonial Social Science Research Council or were students of Malinowski. Almost all were social anthropologists. At University College, Patterson worked closely with the social anthropologist MG Smith, who was lead academic of the Rastafari Report. Smith had written a PhD at SOAS on Hausa economies under the auspices of the Colonial Social Science Research Council. We shall consider Patterson’s connection to Edith Clarke, the head of the West Indian Social Survey, and a student of Malinowski, presently.

At LSE, David Glass, Patterson’s supervisor, had been a member of the Social Survey and of the Colonial Social Science Research Council. In his graduate studies Patterson was also influenced by Lucy Mair, a Malinowski-trained anthropologist who had taught colonial administration and had written on cultural transformation amongst African natives. Meanwhile, Patterson’s wife, Nerys Patterson, was supervised by Isaac Schapera, another Malinowskian-influenced social anthropologist of southern African tribal systems. Nerys Patterson was responsible for guiding her husband through the “more esoteric aspects” of African kinship systems.

**Slavery and Sisyphus**

The imperially-inflected tropes of social anthropology – functionally integrated solidarity, disruptive contact and change, and pathological disorder – are evident in the writings that eventuate from Patterson’s PhD and which implicate Rastafari in the afterlives of slavery. Take, for instance, his functionalist definition of society as “a territorially-based, self-sufficient collectivity possessing some reasonably coherent and consistent system of values, norms and beliefs”.

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Patterson, in his PhD thesis-turned-book, assesses the Jamaica colony to be less a “total social system” and more an “ill-organized system of exploitation” comprised of a “collection of autonomous plantations” 29.

Of fundamental importance to the argument of Sociology of Slavery is the claim that this ill-organization was due to a lack of “settled habits of morality and order” amongst slaves and masters albeit for different reasons 30. On the one hand, white men visited sexual violence and rape upon black women 31. On the other hand, because status and divisions within and between slaves were defined for them by local elites, any extant social sanctions pertaining to sexual behavior broke down 32.

In this functionalist schema Patterson parses resistance to domination in a particular way. He is adamant that the history of slave revolts in Jamaica should be understood as comprising a particular continuum of struggle enacted mostly by newly-arrived Africans and/or runaways brought up in the Maroon camps 33. In contrast, he sees no evidence that the pattern of behavior of plantation slaves and the “creole” populations they sired could be considered resistive. Creoles, claims Patterson 34, were distinct from Africans in so far as they collectively exhibited a “broken trauma-ridden personality” and a general attitude of “total indifference”.

To better understand this distinction between creole and African we can consider Patterson’s 1972 novel, Die the Long Day, a creative accompaniment to his research on slave revolts. Near the end of the story, Patterson has Africanus, the continental-born Obeah man, counsel Cicero, the creole, thus:

> it’s enough to survive through this hell to make ourselves immortal in the eyes of our descendants. It takes courage, it takes a great people, to preserve body and mind through all this. Our children will see it this way, and they’ll be proud 35.

However, at this point, Africanus is as broken as Cicero under the weight of the master class’s violent domination. Situated in the novel thus, Africanus’s words take on an elegiac rather than jubilant quality and seem to ring hollow with Cicero. It is as if Patterson is suggesting to the reader that Africanus is an evolutionary endpoint; in functionalist terms, the African past has no efficacy with which to drive the collective pursuit of freedom for creoles.

Overall, then, Patterson makes a categorical distinction between Africans and Creoles, with the behavioral patterns of the latter performing not an insurrectionary but “cathartic” function – relief from tedium, an outlet for pent up aggressions, organized competition against each other, and a safe displacement of tensions against the master class 36. Moreover, Patterson identifies in this Creole pathology a postcolonial fate. Writing a few years after independence, Patterson 37 claims that Jamaica does not possess an “integrated culture rooted in a past having some degree of continuity”. The

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29 Patterson, The Sociology of Slavery, 70.
30 Patterson, 38–40, 318–22.
31 Patterson, 41.
32 Patterson, 57, 159.
33 Patterson, “Slavery and Slave Revolts,” 316.
34 The Sociology of Slavery, 151.
35 Orlando Patterson, Die the Long Day (St Albans: Mayflower, 1973), 253.
36 The Sociology of Slavery, 251.
disintegrative afterlives of slavery remains in the “social-psychological situation” of the urban lower-classes for whom collective action is “almost impossible except on a purely spontaneous level” 38.

And yet Patterson finishes his Sociology of Slavery on a quixotic note. The slave, he maintains, was never “completely subdued” and even creoles revolted from time to time. But if, in functionalist terms, the domination of the master was so complete, from “whence arose the spirit of rebellion in the slave”? The answer to this question, suggests Patterson 39, must lie “outside the framework of the sociologist” in an existentialist inquiry into the human condition, inspired by the writings of Albert Camus, which rests upon the imperative that acts upon all individuals to become free.

Hence, a central paradox emerges in Patterson’s early research program. On the one hand, the functionally disintegrative effects of slavery make it such that the active pursuit of freedom can only be considered existentially. On the other hand, amongst those most unfree – historically, plantation workers and in contemporary times, the urban poor – the meaningfulness of such pursuit is devalued by reference to its pure spontaneity and the displacing nature of its catharsis. Within this paradox, Patterson crafts his historical narrative of creole pathology as a window onto the political prospects of independence. I would argue that this is the interlocutory purpose that drives the treatment of Rastafari in his novel, The Children of Sisyphus, which he begins to formulate even before his university career and writes over the course of his undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Patterson scripts a key protagonist - Brother Solomon - as a stand in for Claudius Henry, the controversial self-styled Moses of the Rastafari movement 40. Patterson also seems to model Brother Solomon on another Rastafari notable, Mortimo Planno, who took the initiative to engage with the University College over the 1960 report, and with whom Patterson had personal encounters. Brother Solomon, like Planno, is a well-read intellectual and a worldly seer 41. As a leader of the Dungle-dwelling Rastafari, Brother Solomon takes upon himself the burden of fulfilling the prophecy of repatriation to Ethiopia.

The plot then twists in good part around Brother Solomon’s secrecy concerning the fate of the two brethren who have been sent overseas to petition Emperor Haile Selassie I for repatriation. Unbeknownst to all but Brother Solomon, the Rastafari ambassadors have disappeared. Still, he lies to his congregation that the representation has been successful and that ships will be arriving presently to take the Rastafari family home. Brother Solomon calculates that a fleeting twelve hours of promissory happiness for his followers is more than they would have for the rest of their life.

Patterson presents this moment of deception by way of his reading of the moment of meaningfulness that Camus 42 injects into the torture of Sisyphus. As Sisyphus walks down the hill, to roll the boulder again, he is “conscious” of the absurdity of the eternally repeating task. Such a consciousness, argues Camus 43, rests on the ability to contemplate suicide seriously – that is, to judge “whether life is or is not worth living”. In the end, Brother Solomon commits suicide. However, Patterson infers that this act is a “comic” rather than tragic repetition. A belief in salvation as

38 Patterson, 42.
39 The Sociology of Slavery, 282.
40 see Scott, “The Paradox of Freedom,” 125, 142.
43 495.
repatriation to Africa cannot cultivate consciousness but can only socio-psychologically displace a confrontation with the Sisyphean afterlives of slavery.

In scripting *Children of Sisyphus*, Patterson not only draws on his own fieldwork but also from the 1950s ethnography of George Eaton Simpson. Simpson argued that urban Jamaican “cults” performed a cathartic function similar to the creole beliefs described by Patterson in his PhD thesis. Simpson’s influence is also evident in a 1964 social commentary wherein Patterson claims that Rastafari suffer not simply from economic poverty but from status poverty - “intense role deprivation”. A “highly disorganized group”, with ambitions that “black men will get revenge by compelling white men to serve them”, Rastafari apparently partake in a “disguised involvement” in society to reverse its race hierarchies.

Clearly, then, Patterson renders blackness – especially in terms of a collective commitment to African redemption - as a pathological value, just like Malinowski had, and as evidence of dysfunctionality, that is, an inability/refusal to pursue independence by rationally accepting and working upon the mores and norms of modern civilization. Caught between the traditional and the modern, reactive natives pervert abstract and associational symbols and ideologies to serve particular ascriptive identities. For Malinowski, Black nationalism loomed large over colonial development; in Patterson’s era of postcolonial independence, it is a Black messiah overseeing a Pan-African project of repatriation.

But is the Rastafari belief in repatriation really without reason? After all, Patterson himself has Brother Solomon proselytize that “only the rotten rich or the desperately poor can truly contemplate the act of suicide”, and that “only we can see that suicide is the supreme reason” Patterson also admits that when it comes to world affairs – and here he name checks Mortimo Planno – Rastafari are “unusually well informed”. Incidentally, Planno was part of a Black internationalist network of activists and thinkers, including a London-based Rastafari, Jah Bones. Here is Jah Bones’ critical reflection on Claudius Henry:

On the topic of repatriation Inl learned well enough from the manifestations of ... Claudius Henry self-styled reparier of the breach. They exploited in a markedly humiliating manner the emotions and sentiments possessed by Rastas for repatriation. Their realisation of repatriation cannot be based on dreams, rumour and propaganda. Still less ... on furtive underground entrance into Africa.. [but to] force presidents and prime ministers, world councils and churches to respect Rasta by listening and responding positively to a just demand.

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46 Patterson, 15–17.
This reasoning seems to fall far from the comic obliviousness that Patterson has Brother Solomon embrace. Rather, amongst the Rastafari, repatriation seems to be a political project deliberatively and deliberately pursued.52

**Patriarchy and the Changing Native**

I will now argue that Patterson’s functionalist aporia – the need to attribute pathology to Rastafari even in the evidentiary light of reason – is an emanation of imperial and racial concerns over the “changing native”. Specifically, I will argue that in Patterson’s early work the unsettling phenomenon of black migration in both Britain’s African empire and the United States combine in a historical sociological narrative that pits the preservation of patriarchal order against the retention of African and black behavioral patterns and mores.

Robert Park’s analysis of African American assimilation owed mostly to his journalistic career and his tenure with Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute53. Only later did Park read Malinowski. Still, his urban sociology shares much with that of imperial social anthropology: a focus on the change from “concrete and personal” relations to “abstract and impersonal relations” in economic and social life, or of “smaller, mutually exclusive” social groups into “larger and more inclusive” ones; and the degree to which a shift from ascriptive to associational life fundamentally modify the characteristics and aptitudes of the group undergoing change54.

When it comes to African Americans, Park argues that cultural change is marked not by the normal transmission of the “social tradition” from “the parents to the children”, but by the conquest and “imposition of one people on another”, wherein a “fusion” of values and practices takes place only slowly and imperfectly55. “Primitive” groups, claims Park56, are able to incorporate the “external forms” of civilization far more easily than the “aims, attitudes, sentiments” that underly them. In the case of the enslaved African, Park argues that in crossing the Atlantic he “left behind almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament”. Indeed, the one “distinctive institution” that enslaved Africans developed, the “negro church”, was “in all essences faithful copies of the “white man’s” denominational forms of the period, if inflected with tropical temperament57.

Franklin Frazier uses Park’s framework to adduce the civilizational trajectory of the black family in the US. Frazier58 effectively attenuates African cultural retentions to mating mores which, he argues, were “liberated from group control and became subject only to the external control of the master”.

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52 In my correspondence with John Homiak, he recalled interviewing an elderly George Simpson in the late 1980s. Simpson was aware that one of the primary reasons why Rastafari agreed to engage with him was due to his fieldwork experiences in Nigeria. In short, Rastafari in the 1950s wished to extract practical knowledge of African societies from Simpson to aid in their deliberations over repatriation.


56 115.

57 Park, 118, 123.

Additionally, Frazier claims that black racial temperament was attracted to the “apocalyptic visions of the white man” and that masters used formal religious instruction in white Christianity for the moral development of their slaves. Through such “imitation and education” of sexual behavior and family life, the post-emancipation black peasantry developed a “folk culture” that exhibited the “elementary forms of social control”.

Subsequently, Frazier contends that this relatively stable – if primitive – peasant order was upended with the urban migration that is contemporary to his own era. Using language redolent of social anthropologists of the British empire, Frazier speaks of “tribeless men” who have lost “much of their naive outlook on life and have become sophisticated in the ways of the city”. Falling into illicit pursuits, these men extend an “individuated” and “purely rational attitude” to women, wherein “sexual gratification” becomes commodified. In this urban context, matriarchal domination becomes pathological to social reproduction because illegitimacy “swells” the ranks of “juvenile delinquents”, thus creating a “serious economic and social problem”. Frazier looks towards the black male worker for solutions. Struggles for living wages bring black workers into cooperation with white workers and this associational outlook replaces an ascriptive commitment to race. Ultimately, Frazier promotes a class politics underwritten by patriarchal family life as redress to the pathologies of urban transition.

The Park/Frazier narrative of pathological urbanization works its way into Patterson’s social anthropology principally through Edith Clarke, a white Jamaican anthropologist and student of Malinowski. Funded by the Colonial Social Science Research Council, Clarke headed the West Indian Social Survey under the auspices of which she undertook one of the first systemic studies on the family in the English-speaking Caribbean in 1957. Clarke’s research was, in Patterson’s words, “very important” for his early work.

In My Mother who Fathered me, Clarke references Frazier when she argues that the contemporary Jamaican family structure owes little to African-sourced matriarchal models. Rather, as chattel of another man, the enslaved father could not be a “source of protection and provision for mother and children” and it was for this reason that the mother and grandmother assumed these roles. At emancipation, men were still not enabled to “assume the role of father and husband in the new society” due to the fact that they remained tied to the old plantations through apprenticeship. Like Frazier, though, Clarke highlights a subsequent movement off the plantation into either marginal lands or settlement schemes sponsored by Christian missions. Ownership even of small plots became connected to marriage and higher class status amongst the post-emancipation peasantry, which finally allowed the man to assume the role of father and husband “without the threat of external interference in these relationships”. When Clarke surveys the diversity of family life in contemporary Jamaica, her normative reference point is this post-emancipation patriarchal peasantry.

59 31, 37.
60 Frazier, 290, 481.
61 285, 290.
62 Frazier, 481.
63 Frazier, 474–75.
66 Edith Clarke, My Mother Who Fathered Me (Kingston: University Of West Indies Press, 1999), 2–3.
67 Clarke, 4.
Patterson takes from Clarke the proposition that slavery destroyed African models of family life. He cites Clarke’s work in his *Sociology of Slavery* and makes similar claims about patriarchal dysfunctionality. For instance, Patterson 68 claims that because slavery treated both male and female as workers to be punished “indecently and severely”, the “negro male” became completely demoralized by his incapacity to “assert his authority either as husband or father”, in the process losing all “pretensions to masculine pride”, thereby developing the “irresponsible parental and sexual attitudes that are to be found even today”. Furthermore, Patterson broadly agrees with Clarke that the post-emancipation peasantry in nineteenth century Jamaica made tremendous efforts to overcome the legacies of slavery hence forging a stable pattern of social reproduction 69.

In a 1972 article entitled *Toward a Future that has no Past*, Patterson brings together the British social anthropological obsession with the “changing native” and the American urban sociology narrative of patriarchal dysfunction to provide a contemporary evaluation of the political prospects of the Black diaspora across the Americas. In this comparative exercise, Patterson attributes to the West Indian peasantry a sufficient social, economic and geographical distance to European supremacism that affords the peasant a normal rather than pathological personality. In everyday life, the peasant inhabits “one complex of cultural patterns, with its own scales of values, its own ideas concerning good and evil, beauty and ugliness, right and wrong” 71. Effectively, Patterson confers on the peasantry the same condition conferred by social anthropologists on southern African tribes: they live in a (primitive) social system that coheres through a functionally integrated solidarity.

However, Patterson warns that the normality of this solidarity is disturbed when the peasant migrates to the urban areas. No longer “cocooned” by his “folk culture” from the assault of “high urban culture” on his dignity, the peasant is forced into a “terrible process of deliberate spiritual exile and re-culturation” 72. Patterson calls attention to recently urbanized peasants who join the growing mass of “aimless, unemployed men and women who live in the cramped hovels of the shanties.” They are, in fact, one of the only segments of the West Indian masses that suffer from “a sense of loss and of isolation”. Rejected by the city, this motley crew now “spurn ... urban culture” and seek “disalienation” by “evolving a mystique of blackness and political ideology of black unity” 73. Through such irrationality they assert an identity with Africa. We return, then, to Brother Solomon and his comic response to the labor of Sisyphus in the era of independence.

**Social Death and Modern Freedom**

Patterson’s 1972 article is an important marker in the conceptual universalizing of his Jamaica-focused analysis. I shall now use this article to summarize Patterson’s identification of Rastafari with the pathological “changing native” along with his inscription of normative claims over blackness. By laying out four main propositions, I will suggest how this framing remains activated in Patterson’s subsequent conceptualization of social death as well as his philosophical musings on freedom in the afterlives of slavery, both of which ultimately comprise what might be called an eschatology of slavery.

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71 Patterson, 35.
72 Patterson, 35–36.
73 Patterson, 38.
Firstly, Patterson asserts that slavery destroyed African models of family life and behavioral patterns. Secondly, Patterson claims that in a “clear break” with the disintegrating effects of plantation slavery, a peasant subculture emerged that demonstrated some kind of normalcy in terms of a functionally integrated solidarity predicated upon settled family life and at least some redemption of the black man as a patriarch. The actual religious practices and principles that underpin social solidarity in these contexts were either “wholly Christian” or “peculiarly black American” (which in the final analysis is a gloss on European religiosity) 74.

Thirdly, the contemporary crisis is both post-emancipation and post-peasantry. It is “entirely the creation of modern socio-economic factors” inducing pathological “ghetto patterns of life” – pathological because of the dysfunctional relationship between illegitimacy, family breakdown and poverty 75. Ascriptive group solidarity has now disintegrated and has been replaced with atomization and private criminality. There is no black culture to be found amongst the urban masses: it is simply a culture of poverty 76.

Fourthly, “blacks”, Patterson urges, “must abandon their search for a past [and] recognize they lack all claims to a distinctive cultural heritage”. In doing so, black people might become the “first group in the history of mankind” to transcend a cultural heritage and become the most truly “modern of all peoples” – a people with no need for nation, past, particular culture, but whose associational “style of life” will be that of a rational and continually changing adaptation to the “exigencies of survival” 77.

These propositions, especially the positing of a series of existential breaks in contrast to the sustained normativity of patriarchy, are what lead Patterson to argue in Slavery and Social Death that it is not property per se that marks the distinct condition of the slave, but rather an alienation of all his rights by virtue of being dis-affiliated from his blood heritage. This notion of “natal alienation”, first introduced in a 1979 article, is Patterson’s most influential contribution to the analysis of slavery and is what defines the “death” in “social death” 78.

But let us be clear about the nature of this death. Firstly, it is filial. Patterson renders “natality” as biologically rooted in “living blood relations” and the “claims and obligations” that they make on the individual’s “more remote ancestors and ... descendants”, that is, “natural forebears” 79. “Humanized fictive kinship”, Patterson 80 claims, is not the same as “claims and obligations of real kinship or with those involving genuine adoption”. Real, here, means formally sanctioned rather than simply “expressive”.

This leads to the second point: Patterson imbues filial claims with a patriarchal normativity based on the functionalist distinction between informal familial relations built by slaves but made illegitimate by the master, and formal legally enforceable ties of “blood” 81. The latter, as we have seen in Patterson’s prior work, almost always invokes a patriarchal question of the standing of the

74 Patterson, 47.
75 Patterson, 46.
76 Patterson, 54–55.
77 Patterson, 60.
79 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5 my emphasis.
80 63.
81 see Patterson, 337.
father/husband and the legal lack of this standing under slavery. The loss of this patriarchal position is heavily attached to an honor economy (as patriarchy always is).

Due to these specifications, Patterson provides his famous definition of slavery as “the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons”. As universal as that definition might be presented, it nonetheless rests upon and affirms the social anthropological framings of Patterson’s early work.

Recall that in the functionalist schema, the patterns of behavior that are tied to slaves’ collective past are pathologized, that is, they are cast as abnormal. Hence, in this schema, non-patriarchal survival systems – the only counter- systems possible under slavery - are rendered analytically surplus to explanations of order. Furthermore, this illegitimacy and redundancy is supposed to be reproduced even in the afterlives of slavery. Herein lies the importance of Patterson’s claim to a series of existential breaks whereby the only functional form of social solidarity remains a filial, patriarchal one while the slave, creole and then ghetto-dweller repeatedly experience social death.

Put another way, the social anthropological concern with white-patriarchal order versus native pathology reemerges in Slavery and Social Death when filiality is presented not just as a “legal” privilege of slave-masters (which it is) but when it acts as an epistemological device conjoined to a normative understanding of power and domination. In short, social death epistemically valorizes the power of the slaveholder, and then missionary.

At the same time as Patterson is working on universalizing a sociological definition of slavery, he also attempts to construct a universal ethics of modern freedom. But in this conjoined endeavor, Patterson is again guided by the four propositions listed above. This time, the religious imbrications of patriarchy come into play, as do the socio-economic factors of modern life including the tension between associational and ascriptive ethics.

Recall Patterson’s claim that African retentions in the religious practices of enslaved peoples do not provide – except as powerless catharsis - any meaningful material by which to address the Sisyphean challenges of slavery and its afterlives. And even the doctrines, morality, and principles of Black Christianity are sourced from Europe. His philosophical commitments to European Christianity are advanced in a book he writes just prior to Slavery and Social Death.

In Ethnic Chauvinism, Patterson sets up the philosophical argument as to what makes slavery a uniquely catalyzing phenomenon for Western civilization – namely, its ethical predilection for “freedom”. He begins by taking Camus’s definition of the individual as a true deviant for whom creativity becomes “an end in itself and a means for the promotion not of the collective, nor of some abstract entity called the group or tradition, but of his own ends and the ends of other individuals” With this provocation, Patterson provides a cosmological gloss to the social anthropological distinction between the “particularistic conformity” of ascriptive group (rural-tribal) life versus “open, free willed” associative (urban-civilized) life and a non-pathological “commitment to the idea of change itself”.

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82 While I do not have space to pursue this further, the argument I am making has implications for how we evaluate the fates of the female protagonists in Patterson’s early novels: especially, Sister Dinah in Children of Sisyphus and Quasheba in Die the Long Day.

83 see also Scott, “The Paradox of Freedom,” 158.


85 184, 194.
Patterson then codes tribal conformity – and its embrace of ethnicity – as the Hebraic tradition of the Western mind. In this tradition, crises of alienation and uprooting are met with faith that an indivisible god will save his chosen people 87. Zion, as Patterson puts it, is the answer to exile (as is proclaimed by Rastafari). Nonetheless, industrial civilization undermines all old faiths in so far as it is an intrinsically secular movement. In contemporary times, then, the Hebraic attempt at restoration becomes impossible. Patterson channels the Malinowskian paradigm when he returns his cosmological gloss to sociological process by referencing:

the tragedies of those ‘underdeveloped minorities’ of the advanced industrial cultures who have demanded inclusion into the civilization and its material and social rewards while insisting on remaining faithful to their particular creeds, ideologies and styles of living 88.

In opposition to the Hebraic tradition (and, by extension, Rastafari and blackness per se) Patterson prescribes “pristine Christianity”. Unique amongst the religions of the world, Christianity originally balances an “outward universalism” based on individualism with a “communism of love” 89. However, Patterson 90 acknowledges that the “symbolic structure of Christianity” was globalized through the slave experience. For this reason, Christ’s sacrifice could be seen conservatively – as a bonding of the fallen to a master – or liberally – as a redemption of the fallen.

Above all, and Patterson 91 carries these considerations into Slavery and Social Death, he is convinced that this master/slave dualism – a unique feature of European Christianity – is the sole religious source capable of working through slavery’s afterlives and the problem of freedom. Thus, Patterson argues that only European Christianity can present the pristine universalism of Jesus in a form motile enough for modern-day struggles, that is, by dwelling on the interplay between individual agency and collective ethics:

Everyman and everywoman must now become his and her own philosopher, must face the crisis in all its crushing loneliness, and must explore the whole person and bring the whole being into play in the endless struggle with it. The solution is the struggle 92.

Patterson’s universalization of the condition of social death and of the pursuit of modern freedom rests upon a refusal to seriously consider that the self-ascribed “sufferers” make sense of the afterlives of slavery with reason. This refusal is an epistemological and normative consequence of social anthropology and urban sociology’s framing of the changing native and black migration, exemplified in the urban presence of Rastafari at the cusp of independence. What difference would it make, then, if we examined the movement of Rastafari through Rastafari reason?

Pinnacle and Self-determination

Kwame Dawes 93 observes that Children of Sisyphus is perhaps the first piece of Jamaican literature wherein the protagonists are presented as “wholly city people”. But in fact, Rastafari Studies has conclusively demonstrated that Rastafari culture was developed in a coming-and-going between

87 Patterson, 271–72.
88 Patterson, 279.
89 Patterson, 217.
90 233.
91 Slavery and Social Death, 70–71, 74.
92 Patterson, Ethnic Chauvinism, 280.
urban and rural areas. Carole Yawney’s ethnographic work with Rastafari in the 1970s speaks even then of the continuing “oscillation” between rural and urban, which constitutes the “primary dynamic in the development of the movement” 94. But from 1940 to the late 1950s, when Patterson began to analyze Rastafari, these oscillating movements pivoted around Pinnacle, a famous rural commune in the hills of St Catherine 95.

At Pinnacle, Leonard Howell, an ex-Garveyite and one of the early preachers who identified Haile Selassie I as the Black Messiah, gathered around 700 people to build a commune of more than 150 acres. While repatriation was an early aim of the Rastafari movement (and it remains so), Daive Dunkley 96 argues that Howell’s initial plan was to mold colonial Jamaica into a microcosm of what he took to be an independent Ethiopia. In service of a Black self-determining liberated territory, the residents of Pinnacle partook in agriculture, livestock, baking, charcoal ing, arts and crafts. That which they did not consume they sold to surrounding villages. In short, Pinnacle provided an alternative not only to the trade union base of white and brown local elites but to colonial dependency itself 97.

Much of the oscillation of Rastafari between rural and urban milieus was due to cyclical and destructive police raids on Pinnacle. In 1959, the year of the final police-led dismantling of Pinnacle, Edna Fisher and Claudius Henry inaugurated the African Reform Church of God in Christ (ARC) which, as Dunkley 98 notes, effectively replaced Pinnacle as the most popular Rastafari-oriented organization in Jamaica. Indeed, that is precisely how colonial elites apprehended the ARC. For instance, the judge at the trial of Henry noted that “a man called Leonard Howell .. had assumed exactly the same role as Henry now assumes – a self-appointed prophet to lead the people of Jamaica back to Africa” 99. Regardless, after 1959 the Rastafari movement spread permanently across the island. Many yards and camps set up “miniature Pinnacle” operations in semi-rural and urban areas, each proliferating leaders including those in Kingston visited by Patterson such as Mortimo Planno 100.

In his interview with David Scott 101, Patterson reflects at some length on the political context in which he started to write Children of Sisyphus. While he briefly mentions Pinnacle, he is silent on the anti-colonial connections between Pinnacle, Claudius Henry, and the Rastafari yards and camps in the Dungle which he himself visited. Instead, he attributes popular fears of Rastafari to a sensational dreadlocked serial killer, Whappy King, who hung in 1952.

Patterson’s depoliticization and sensationalization of Rastafari is strikingly at odds with the contemporary politics that his interlocutors were avowedly part of. For instance, Planno was part of the first “mission to Africa”, organized by Norman Manley in 1961 as a response to the University Report the year before 102. Rastafari self-organized and self-funded another informal Mission to Africa in 1965. In

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98 113.
100 Bones, One Love, 28.
Rex Nettleford’s opinion, “this exercise.. betrayed an understanding on the part of some of the movement’s leading members of the practical considerations relating to repatriation”, with the brethren on this trip travelling with a list comprising the skills and occupations of 1000s of Rastafari to deliver to Haile Selassie I.

It is far more persuasive, then, to narrate the urbanization of the Rastafari movement not as a post-emancipation pathology, dysgenic to the era of independence, but as a continuation – if also re-constitution – of a deliberate and deliberative project of anti-colonial self-determination. Additionally, and as I shall now argue, an ethics of freedom emerges out of this alternative narrative that is strikingly congruent to Patterson’s yet does not require the pathologization of black community nor the excision of African retrentions in the progressive struggle over modernity.

Rastafari Reason and Freedom

Between 1840 and 1865 tens of thousands of enslaved abord ships “liberated” by the British royal navy were re-shipped to the Caribbean as indentured laborers. Kumina communities in Jamaica are principally descended from these “recaptives”, many of whom hailed from the Kongo region. Kumina people interpolate their members as neither Jamaicans nor blacks but as Africans. A frequent Kumina ritual is the memorial ceremony wherein adherents are “ridden” by the ancestral spirits and where chants are composed in clearly recognizable Central West African languages. Kumina rituals, termed “African work”, are designed to heal sickness and imbalance by interpreting life events through a deep sense of community continuity that resides in the “collective memory, grief, and indignation regarding African people’s capture, exile, enslavement, and oppression”.

Leonard Howell recruited his Rastafari followers heavily from St Thomas, a part of Jamaica where recaptives settled and where Kumina flourished. Rastafari researchers such as Dr Shamara Alhassan and Sister Hodesh confirm that Kumina was fundamental to the nascent Rastafari rituals developed at Pinnacle, especially by women. At least one Rastafari leader who left Pinnacle in 1951 was known as a “Kumina Queen”. Those Rastafari women who grew up with Kumina as the “most spiritual life” seem also to be women who played an active role resisting the colonial opposition to the commune.

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103 Nettleford, Mirror Mirror, 72.
111 see Dunkley, 98, 108.
Kumina most probably introduced a key logic into existing strands of Ethiopianism—exhibited by Garveyism and Baptism—that ultimately distinguished Rastafari from other biblical-based diasporic faiths. Clinton Hutton, drawing on the work of Robert Hill, puts it like this: something had to move Howell from a standard Ethiopianist position that God was Black to a more radical proposition that Haile Selassie I was “God”. Now it is true that, unlike most traditions of ancestor intercession including Kumina, Rastafari audaciously seeks direct communion with the ultimate creating force. That said, direct intercession is a component of some African-derived ancestor veneration, albeit only to be used in circumstances of extreme danger. In Howell’s era, Kumina people referred to Selassie I as “Nzambi Mpungu”, the ultimate spiritual agent of Bakongo cosmology. If Kumina cast ancestrality as an unmediated African connection, then Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen I could become the ultimate father and mother, guiding the children through extreme danger.

Kumina’s influence certainly outlasted Pinnacle: there is evidence of Howell and his Rastafari followers still playing Kumina drums and songs into the early 1980s. Pa-Ashanti, an original master-drummer of the Nyahbinghi order, claims that he earned his early reputation playing Kumina instruments. Indeed, other urban-based Rastafari leaders, such as Bongo Watto of the Youth Black Faith, visited Pinnacle and partook in reasonings with Howell and others. Watto and his peers drew from the Kumina-influenced tradition at Pinnacle while also contesting elements of it—especially its centering of women in spiritual life. Some, who undertook another Pinnacle-like marronage in the Wairaka hills of east Kingston, developed the language of Rastafari further. Through this relatively short yet intense period of coming-and-going, contested inheritance, and innovation, emerged the “I” concept in Rastafari cosmology.

The “I” concept posits a radical equality of treatment and perception amongst humans. There are no oppositional pronouns in Itesvar (the Rastafari language): for example, “you” becomes “the I”; “you all” becomes “the I dem”; and one greets a congregation as “ones and ones” or as “family”. Crucially, this equality does not infer conformity. The “theocratic reign” principle of Rastafari is less religious and more about a “livity”, that is, a holistic conception and practice of living with and for the collective good. In particular, each individual is empowered and required to determine their own ethical course of action based on the principle of theosis—each one is god in human and human in god. The commonly heard term “irie” does not mean simply “feeling good”; rather, it infers a state of critically-arrived-at determination where one is free to decline as much as to accept a social convention.

115 “on Empress Menen see Jahzani Kush, Blue Fyah: The Ascension of the Jahess in Rastafari (Self Published, 2019).
Michael Barnett describes this productive tension as comprising an ethics of acephalous communion (driven by the imperative to be “irie”) and an ideology of “organize and centralize” (a commandment claimed to have been given to Rastafari directly by Selassie I in his 1966 visit to the Caribbean). I would argue that this dialectic of principled individualism and universalistic communion is analogous to the modern freedom ethic that Patterson presumes to only derive from European Christianity and its master/slave dualism. Here might lie a different eschatology of slavery. At the very least, the Rastafari ethics of freedom is a far cry from Patterson’s presumption that the movement is driven by a simple desire to reverse racial hierarchies.

Consider the following line of logic. Pinnacle begins after a brutal attempt by Italian fascism to reduce Ethiopia’s imperium into one more European colony. The poor and the workers of the Anglo Caribbean sight in this racial geopolitics a struggle over the afterlives of slavery and the prospect of anti-colonial self-determination. Kumina helps the Diasporic supporters of Ras Tafari to fold the Ethiopian imperium into the fabric of ancestor intercession and spiritual communion. Rastafari thereby develops its distinct cosmology tasked with creative survival in conditions of extreme danger, a charge answered through the collectivist ethic of the “I” concept and the freedom principle of theosis. God, for many Rastafari, is not a “duddy” (a ghost) but none other than “the Almighty I”; and when Rastafari declare Haile Selassie I or Empress Menen I, the roman numeral is substituted for the pronoun sound of “my”.

All this profoundly undermines the four propositions by which Patterson frames the normativity of blackness and through which he arrives at a universalist conception of social death and modern freedom. Recall, once more, the claim to a series of existential breaks – slavery then post-emancipation peasant formation then urbanization; recall also that European Christianity remains the only resource with which a proper (because patriarchal) and progressive social order can be induced within modernity. Yet consider the following. Kumina, an African healing system, was introduced after emancipation. Through the course of the late 19th and early 20th century this non-Christian system of ancestor veneration and intercession oscillated between the rural and the urban, sounding unquestionably African retentions. Pinnacle was a collective response to the afterlives of slavery that did not originate with slavery nor with the European Christianity. The inheritance by Rastafari of a Kongo modality of collective security was conveyed by the matriarchs as much as the patriarchs.

It must be acknowledged that by the 1960s, the locus of the Rastafari movement was more urban than rural; and in this shift, as I have noted, the movement became far more patriarchal in its organizational norms. Yet still, a strong sense of non-patriarchal familiarity remained and by the 1980s was resurgent. This was a relationality that followed African conceptions and configurations of family

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as “flexible and expansive”, “adoptive, corporate, spiritual and intellectual” as well as biological \textsuperscript{126}, and that relied just as much upon community rebuilding as upon filial genealogy \textsuperscript{127}.

I am not Jamaican, but I am Rastafari. In this respect, I am reminded of a saying often uttered by i-dren in the UK: “if your parents won’t have you then Rastafari will”. I ask my Rastafari Studies colleagues whether such a phrase exists in Jamaica too. Ras Wayne Rose responds in the affirmative, recounting “when your mother and father forsake thee, then Ras Tafari will pick thee up”. Ras Kaimoh – also known as John Homiak – recalls an old Nyahbinghi chant:

If your mother won’t come (to Fari)...
If your father won’t come...
If your mother won’t come and your father won’t come...
You mus’ come...come today..

Ras Jahlani Niaah, a student of Mortimo Planno, remembers that the elder would address this principle by saying “if we don’t take our rejected, who else will”. Sister Kathy Howell, daughter of Leonard Howell, and who grew up at Pinnacle, recollects that her father would say “I don’t have illegitimate children, you are all Howell” \textsuperscript{128}.

Conclusion

Sorentino \textsuperscript{129} is right to examine the motility and salience of social death by way of a zeitgeist. Her argument helps to explain why, in Black Studies, the textual and citational mooring of the concept in Patterson’s oeuvre is so loose. For this reason, I would not want to claim that the idea of social death has no analytical purchase in confronting the horrors of slavery and its afterlives \textsuperscript{130}. One of Patterson’s lasting contributions, amongst others, is to try and explain – rather than explain away – the terror of slavery through sociological analysis.

That said, I maintain that it is not only scholastic curiosity that impels us to tighten those moorings vis-à-vis Patterson’s early works. The ethos of Black Studies itself requires us to contextualize struggles over knowledge formation as part of struggles for, against and over Black community. And we should take caution in erasing particular diasporic communities and projects in the course of universalizing a concept’s efficacy. Ultimately, I have argued that Patterson found his way to “social death” via a social anthropological disavowal of the iterative attempt by Rastafari – especially Rastafari women – to repurpose the black family as an ethical agent of self-determination and reparation.

Along the way, Patterson involved himself in debates about other black families, with Daniel Moynihan for example. And it is striking that in all his scholarship which leads to \textit{Slavery and Social Death}, Patterson persistently presents either a chronological and/or synchronous segregation of black groupings into “proper” and “pathological”. For instance, we come across contrasts between Africans


\textsuperscript{128} School of Sacrament Rastafari University, \textit{Honouring the Legacy, and Important Contributions of the Women of Pinnacle and the Howelli Tradition}.

\textsuperscript{129} “The Sociogeny of Social Death.”

and creoles, then patriarchal peasants and urban single-parent families. Universalized, the concept of social death segregates patriarchal (proper) and non-patriarchal (improper) social systems. A further universalization of the concept via Afropessimism segregates reason (logos) and blackness (pathos).

At the very least, Patterson’s early oeuvre should receive more critical attention if we are to position social death as a formative – even determinative - concept for the field of Black Studies. In excavating the path that Patterson took towards social death, we have had to think with the Rastafari family and other (precarious and contentious) non-filial non-patriarchal familiar relations. I am also thinking of the refusal by a new generation of gender-diverse Black Lives activists and organizers to submit to the paternal propriety of older civil rights figures. Thinking with these formations we might be better equipped to discern what kind of difference, if any, obtains between studying what Sexton eloquently terms “the social life of social death” and studying social life over/besides social death.