

REDEMPTION SONGS

WAYS OF TROPICAL BEING

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The Observer Review, 23 March 1997

When I came across the photograph in 1997 it felt white-hot, as if it would burn through the newspaper on which it was printed, down to the desk. The caption said very little: *Louisiana, 1863: A slave covered in welts after a whipping by his master on a cotton plantation.* That was enough to fill me with rage.

After that, for decades I kept the *Review* among my working files on my desk. Always face down. Now it's filed among my papers somewhere, its accompanying article long forgotten, but the image seared into my memory forever as if by a branding iron.

Recently, now that Donald Trump has ordered it removed from [public displays](#), I've discovered his name was Peter and he was known throughout the US as "Whipped Peter" whose [photo](#) was circulated widely to publicize the brutality of slavery. He had been enslaved on John and Bridget Lyon's Louisiana plantation, where he was flogged almost to death by overseer Artayou Carrier. It sent him almost crazy, recounted Peter, and once he recovered he decided he had to escape.

He fled with three others one night. They rubbed onions on their bodies to evade the bloodhounds. One was caught by the slave hunters and murdered. Peter ran barefoot through creeks, across fields. Ten days later in March 1863 he met some black Union soldiers. He immediately decided to join the Union Army. During his medical examination doctors were shocked at his welts.

White soldiers who saw his back were horrified but the Black ones paid little attention - it was nothing they hadn't seen before or even experienced. Two photographers in the camp photographed Peter and created one of the cheap postcards popularized during the Civil War. Peter's back became one of the most publicized images of slavery. One Union Army surgeon inscribed on a Whipped Peter postcard, "I have found a large number of the four hundred or so contrabands [runaway slaves] examined by me to be as badly lacerated."

Photographs (and videos) of suffering and oppression are commonplace, have been for a long time. Dachau, Tennessee, Biafra, Hanoi, Bangladesh, Dafur, right down to Israel's obscene genocide in Gaza have produced horrific images of suffering and savagery. (Only in the US, however, was there developed a huge industry of postcards of sadism, including lynching [photos](#).)

Despite the anaesthetic effect of surfeit, images of cruelty still can evoke moral outrage and anger, as the murder of George Floyd and the current revulsion towards Israel testifies.

Susan Sontag recalled her first encounter with such images as, "a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany." In her collection of essays *On Photography* she recounted: "For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belson and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have ever seen - in photographs or in real life - ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was 12) and after."

My encounter with the image of Whipped Peter came long after the 1974 watershed epiphany that I experienced at university in Jamaica. I was a callow 18-year-old Trinidadian student who'd sleepwalked through Black Power of 1970 and was jolted out of middle-class naiveté by everything around me in Jamaica: by the intense political fervour surrounding Michael Manley's "democratic socialism"; by Bob Marley's *Natty Dread* and Count Ossie's *Grounation*; by the counter-language of Rastafari; by *The Harder They Come*; and by CLR James' *The Black Jacobins*, Toussaint L'Ouverture and the *San Domingo Revolution*:

For the least fault the slaves received the harshest punishment. In 1685 the Negro Code authorised whipping, and in 1702 one colonist, a Marquis, thought any punishment which demanded more than 100 blows of the whip was serious enough to be handed over to the authorities.. The whip was not always an ordinary cane or woven cord, as the Code

demanded. Sometimes it was replaced by a rigoise, or thick thong of cow-hide, or by the lianes - local growths of reeds, supple and pliant like whalebone. The slaves received the whip with more certainty and regularity than they received their food...

And there were accounts of more sadistic punishments that I cannot bear to repeat here. Then all those impressions bombarding me from different directions all coalesced into the moment at a concert on campus when Burning Spear performed "[Slavery Days](#)" and my epiphany was complete:

*Do you remember the days of slavery?
And they beat us
Do you remember the days of slavery?
And the work was so hard
Do you remember the days of slavery?
And they used us
Do you remember the days of slavery?
'Til they refuse us
Do you remember the days of slavery?*

Over 50 years later that song still sends chills up my spine and gives me goosebumps. It still threatens to sear away a half-century of toughening up by life's experiences and reduce me to the helplessness of a snotty child in one of those toga movies, *The Robe* or *Ben Hur* or *Spartacus*, snivelling because a slave is flogged and my brother says, I eh taking you theatre again if you going and behave so. But I still can't help it when confronted with such horror and sadness presented in repetitive, incantatory vocals that are rooted in West African spirit possession music. I can still see the bass singer Rupert Willington and tenor Delroy Hinds pointing to the horizon beyond the open-air Students' Centre and intoning the unchanging, hypnotic mantra "Do you remember the days of slavery?" over and over in response to Winston Rodney's call in his prophet's voice as old as the Blue Mountains.

And yet it wasn't a negative epiphany like Sontag's, not as unbearable as I find the image of Whipped Peter or lyrics of Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit", both of which seem fashioned as accusations directed at the guilty. I couldn't bear to watch and walked out of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, even though its subject is the courage and heroism of Oskar Schindler. "Slavery Days" was different. It aimed at elevating the downtrodden. Burning Spear's indomitable will to survive and bear witness, his rejection self-pity or vengeance-seeking, and the song's relentless rhythm that pushes ahead without interruptions make "Slavery Days" uplifting. The fires of righteousness burn brighter. Spear's is not the memory of long dead men and past events, but the experience of ancestors who passed through the vale of tears and now live in our hearts. Hence it is always in the present tense like, for instance, Bob Marley's "Rivers of Babylon" or "Slave Driver":

*Every time I hear the crack of the whip, my blood runs cold
I remember on the slave ship, how they brutalize our very soul.*

Marley's memory of enslavement was inspired by the Mighty Sparrows 1963 "Slave" which was also in the present tense:

*I am a slave, from a land so far
I was caught and I was brought here from on Africa.*

The memory of Jewish exile and dispersion in hostile lands, the foundation of their religion, which climaxed in the Nazi holocaust, has been used by modern Israeli exceptionalism and victimhood to justify their continuous, aggressive and genocidal land-grabbing. Their trauma has turned them into Nazis. Contrariwise, the transportation and enslavement that constituted the heart of black culture in the Americas created strength and moral fibre through a culture of inclusion, pleasure and joy, rather than exclusion and revenge-mongering. What better way to affirm the value of life than with a music that can never be anti-humanist, never on the side of death, as is, say, Wagner or some metal rock bands. In their music Black people may sing for recognition, redemption or reparations but never ever for revenge.

“The blues are about freedom, y’know. There’s liberation in reality. When they talk about these songs being sad, the fact that you recognize that which pains you is a very freeing and liberating experience,” says Wynton Marsalis in Ken Burns’ documentary *Jazz*. “It must be strange for other cultures where you spend most your time trying to pretend like you don’t have any of these problems, any of these situations. When I hear the blues it makes me smile.”

Reggae makes you move. It’s not the soaring, lofty pleasure of modern jazz; neither the lamentations of gospel nor the laughter and mockery of calypso. The movement it induces brings a kind of release, like the surmounting of an obstacle. With “Slavery Days” it is the attainment of rectitude through tribulation. *The harder the battle the sweeter the victory*, sang Marley. It is an emotional release felt viscerally through the earthy enjoyment of our physicality.

The many strands of New World black music have complex and convoluted genealogies because of the music’s ability and tendency to absorb any and every influence. The strands mutate with no loss to their black essence. Jamaican music is no exception. Traditional folk and religious forms, proverbs and nursery rhymes all fed into mento; calypso and rhythm-and-blues energy turned it into ska, which retooled modern jazz to make it danceable. But it was the vastness of the Rastafari vision that gave reggae its power and glory. Their faith empowered them to claim, from the lowest rung of the social ladder, the high moral ground. Roots rock reggae became more than just music; it projected a way of walking and talking, a deity and a philosophy, a hairstyle, a lifestyle, symbols and an ites-green-and-gold flag and even a sacred drug.

Poor, uneducated and deeply spiritual, with the help of ganga and the transcendental mysticism of rural immigrant Hindus, the rural Rastas imaginatively reversed time and history and all their indoctrination, especially by white Christianity. They cast their thoughts to Africa to find a black emperor and divine prophet, and then made the return journey to Jamaica as proud Africans. Michael Manley explained it as follows:

Rastafarianism is a true faith in the sense that its believers have taken that step beyond mere rationality into the acceptance of a view of the unknown, unknowable and unprovable, which is faith. To them Haile Selassie is the symbol of god on Earth and God himself is as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The true Rastafarian, therefore, has traced his identity beyond mere history and geography to the ultimate source of all things, for the believer, the Creator Himself. But he has arrived at his Creator through the images and the soil of Africa. By that act he has rediscovered the self that was mislaid in the Middle Passage.

In that act they deconstructed and reformulated English syntax and lexicon. Their invented argot incorporated an African style of speaking in proverbs with Jamaican patois and the motifs and language of the poetic King James Version of the Bible, particularly its Old Testament story of exile and redemption (minus Jahweh's impulse to vengeance). The King James Version provided access to seventeenth-century English, an intrinsically poetic language insulated from modern over-usage and commercial and political appropriation. They made an antique tongue sound natural and contemporary. Take the Psalms 1:1-3:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners... And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

Listen to Marley's "[*Forever loving Jah*](#)":

*Cause just like a tree planted by the rivers of water
That bringeth forth fruit, bringeth forth fruit in due season
Every thing in life got its purpose, find its reason
In every season
Forever, yea.*

There is no lamentation. *Old Man River, don't cry for me*, sings Marley: *I've got a running stream of love, you see*. And rolling underneath is the irresistible rhythm of a locomotive that cannot be stopped or derailed. *So, no matter what stages/ Oh stages, stages, stages they put us through/ We'll never be blue*. Supporting its drive is the eight-beat train whistle on an organ, its melody echoed by: *We'll be forever loving Jah!*

Jamaican slavery was followed as in the US by a callous capitalism, which maintained the hierarchy and its attitudes. I know no other Caribbean country as rigid and conservative in its racial and class segregation. *Four hundred years*, sang Peter Tosh, *and it's the same, the same philosophy*. ("*And God spake on this wise, That his seed shall sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them unto bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years.*" Acts 7:6)

In the chasm between the reality of suffering and the reality of freedom, between a cruel, violent society and Jah's love, between Babylon and Zion, faith can be as rich and as tangible as reality. Jamaicans live with one foot in another, spiritual reality separate from the bricks and mortar the rest of the world inhabits. Marcus Garvey took that dream to Africans scattered throughout the English-speaking world. The Rastafari elaborated Garvey's dream and offered it to the messengers of reggae who passed it on to the world.

The deep pleasure offered by this music is a dialectic at work that cannot be grasped with the mechanical rules of Aristotelian deductive logic. Pleasure and pain are not simple mutually exclusive contradictions, not in the way of strong and weak, near and far or long and short. In those contrasts all criteria except one (power, distance or length) remain stable. With pleasure and pain it's not simply that pleasure feels good and pain feels bad. Pain is specific, pleasure is diffuse; pain has clear functional reasons (to prevent something, such as jumping on a damaged heel), pleasure can be mysterious (why are we drawn to beauty?).

The mechanism Africans in the diaspora developed to cope with slavery, our music, was not the opposite of pain, which is anesthesia. It was pleasure, which Hegel called the negation of the

negation. If the negation of a pain is anesthetic, the negation of that is aesthetic. In this case, the beauty of music. That is what still boggles people. The blues is about heartbreak but is deeply pleasurable at the same time. Burning Spear's "Slavery Days" is a beautiful song about an unimaginably ugly moment in history.

By analogy, the opposite of hate is indifference, and the opposite of indifference can also be love. Again, the negation of the negation.

With their unlikely faith Burning Spear and Bob Marley and all the other reggae warriors gave the entire world a dream of freedom, just when the idealism of the Woodstock generation lost steam. Encountering it in 1974 divided my life into two parts. Forever, yea.

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