

*An Open Letter to Bob Marley:
Time to Create Reggae Dialogues*

Dear Bob,

It's been thirty-four years since your death, yet no other singer or songwriter has articulated both the condition of the marginalized and the humanistic potentials of psychic decolonization more than you. And, arguably, no other public intellectual has illuminated the role racism and classism play in shoring up the neocolonial political economy as poetically as you have. When people gathered together to resist not being seen as people, as they did in Tahrir Square at the beginning of the Arab Spring, they called on your rhythms. When the agony of downpression exceeds me, when images of social equality recede, I draw from your beats.

Some say your oeuvre has become cliché. This is more reflective of the way in which people listen over the meaning of your words than of your ideas becoming irrelevant. Still, what remains after all these years is your spirit. A spirit able to use words as transport. A spirit able to use the sound of poetry set to music to create images. Most importantly, a spirit able to shift affect from numbness to something near empathy, so that thought and recognition may rise in tandem with the concrete jungles you expose.

In spite of what you left us with, Bob, I am growing weary of backward steps in consciousness, of political regressions that grow Babylon, and by the daily slaughter of unprivileged people's lives and bodies. I am, increasingly, relentlessly, thinking about psychic revolt, a distinctive way of thinking and feeling that fuels our acting against Babylon. It is imperative for us to interrogate the world by going into our interior with integrity, made possible by scrutinizing our relationship to social realities. I think this is

what you meant when you implored us to emancipate ourselves mentally in “Redemption Song”.

French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva characterizes revolt as a fusion of “psychic revolt, analytic revolt, artistic revolt”(120), which together produces “a state of permanent questioning, of transformation, change, an endless probing of appearances”(120). But she pushes this idea further, Bob. She proposes that real revolt, not revolutionary movement which so often stalls, requires “unveiling, returning, discovering, starting over”(120) through a process of “permanent questioning that characterizes psychic life and, at least in the best of cases, art”(120).

This brings me to why I’m writing you so late in the day of our exodus. It’s time to put ideas from liberation psychology, specifically those about how to grow psychic life, together with conscious reggae music to carry on the unfinished business of decolonization. Such a pairing could help us enter into the state of mind where we question our social world unrelentingly and, most importantly, our contribution to its production. We can create reggae dialogues, new ways of engaging psychological defenses to liberation, which could evolve the work conscious reggae music set out to do. This form of dynamic dialogue could also aid our recognition that on their own neither inquiry nor socially conscious art (decoupled from analyses of realities it critiques) are ample responses to the traumas people face. Together, theory and art may cultivate conditions in which psychic space opens up allowing us to squarely confront Babylon’s harms.

I see this as a contribution to the development of psychoaesthetic scholarly activism, the kind of work Barbara Duarte Esgalhado is starting to do. This work

advocates a kind of perceptual engagement that synthesizes the different ways in which we come to know, to perceive and source the power to stand up, via the upward psyche (to borrow Bachelard's term), to empire. Also think of the work of Augusto Boal.

Imagine *Theatre of the Oppressed* taking place in people's minds, Bob. You know how reggae music fosters what Fanon promotes as disalienating shifts in consciousness.

Incorporating the affective charge of your art might make people's social and political engagement all the more powerful.

Given your ideological commitments, I believe that using the entertainment industry as your cultural intervention was a wise strategy but an incomplete one. Had you lived longer I would have hoped, given the importance and reach of your work, that you, like intellectuals in the academy, would gift your work to the cultural commons. Ballads such as "One Love", "No Woman No Cry", "Three Little Birds", "Could You Be Loved", "Waiting in Vain" and "Turn Your Lights Down Low" could remain in the commercial catalogue benefitting the Marley Estate financially. Poetry and philosophy such as "So Much Things to Say", "Running Away", "We and Dem", "War", "So Much Trouble in the World", "Guiltiness", "Babylon System", "Zimbabwe", "Coming in From the Cold" and "Redemption Song" could be released immediately into the creative commons (public domain) available for collaboration with other cultural workers, gratis.

I've been thinking about this, Bob, because I'd like to create a reggae opera to tell the story of how downpressors, middle class people who don't walk with the downpressed, turn a blind eye to their experience in Jamaica and elsewhere. I'm imagining hosting intimate groups where we encounter audio-visualscapes of the voice of the downpressor paired with images created by your music. If done right, the reggae

opera experience could arouse psychic revolt catalyzing conversations not routinely had in the (post)colonial world. For the past eight years I've listened to contemporary reggae music searching for the consciousness of Rastafarian ideology, a voice that hammers home anti-racist, anti-classist possibilities. I have yet to find the equivalence in tone, image and feel to what you produced, for example, in "Guiltiness":

These are the big fish (These are the big fish)

Who always try to eat down the small fish (Just the small fish)

I tell you again. They would do anything

To materialize their every wish

Oh yeah. But wait!

Woe to the downpressers. They'll eat the bread of sorrow

Woe to the downpressers. They'll eat the bread of sad tomorrow

Woe to the downpressers. They'll eat the bread of sorrow

Oh yeah. Oh yeah

Bob, juxtaposing your song against narratives of downpressing could, if perceived deeply, crack open collective consciousness about the psychic underpinnings of Babylon, dismantling our denial of its structures. From there we can start to build a humanizing world. The question is: How can we release your radical thought into open space where it can work, in solidarity, with others?

In hope,



Deanne

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Deanne Bell is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Antioch College. She is a depth and liberation psychologist whose primary interest is the liberation of being. Her current work explores the psychology of the downpressor (middle class oppressor) who bystands social injustice through indifference. She is also concerned with how social transformation may come about, ushering in a humanistic society. She sees possibilities for social transformation as the outcome of a psychological process of acting back against downpressing and is working on a reggae opera as a piece of socially conscious art that could potentially catalyze social consciousness. Deanne is also working on a multi-media collaborative project designed to provide a platform for members of Tivoli Gardens, an inner city community in Kingston, Jamaica, to recount their experiences of May 2010 when the Jamaican security forces killed at least 76 civilians in one week. This project is meant to contribute to a healing process in which survivors publicly memorialize loved ones lost and in which historical silences are broken. As a critically self-reflexive researcher and educator Deanne is analyzing her participation in research projects in the hope of contributing to the development of transgressive and transformative research praxes in situations where oppression exists.

Works Cited

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