

ARTICLE

## Social Death and Rastafari Reason

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### Abstract

Orlando Patterson's concept of "social death" has yet to receive a critical analysis congruent to the ethos of Black Studies, which impels us to contextualize struggles over knowledge formation as part of struggles for, against, and over Black community. In this article, I situate the early Patterson not only within an imperial academy but also within its contested Black spaces of post-emancipation independence. I demonstrate how Patterson's intellectual path was shaped by his interactions with the Rastafari movement around the cusp of Jamaica's independence. But I also argue that in his evaluation of the movement Patterson denuded Rastafari of reason. Examining the same concerns of Patterson but through Rastafari reasoning demonstrates that his concept of "social death" might be problematic in some important ways to the purposes of Black Studies.

### Introduction

Orlando Patterson's extensive oeuvre has been subject to regular review (most recently Getachew 2020). 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 magnum opus, *Slavery and Social Death* (e.g., Bodel and Scheidel, 2016). Ula Taylor and Cherod Johnson (2020) ask students of Black Studies whether they "read beyond the first chapters or the legendary essays" of famous scholars (p. 29); Sara-Maria Sorentino (2016) 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?"

Even if Patterson has been well read in Black Studies, the field evinces a tendency towards shallow citational practices in pivotal texts wherein social death is deployed for heavy lifting. Take, for instance, *Scenes of Subjection*, in which Saidiya Hartman's (1997) consultation with *Slavery and Social Death* occurs principally in a footnote that affirms a connection between the concept of "mortified flesh" and "social death" (p. 231). When Frank Wilderson (2015) admits that *Slavery and Social Death* functions "as a ur-text" for his own work, it is accompanied by no sustained engagement (p. 135; see also Wilderson 2010, pp. 14, 315). Jared Sexton (2011) 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" (pp. 18, 28). Meanwhile, in discussing the idea of "terminological dehiscence,"

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Fred Moten (2013, p. 739) briefly aligns Patterson's conception of social death with Hannah Arendt's separation of the social and the political, but does not map the procedure.

In distinction to these attenuated textual and citational engagements, Sorentino (2016) 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 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 1982.

This, of course, was an era which saw the professional inauguration of Black Studies emanating from freedom struggles in North America and liberation 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 (2019) have connected Patterson's first novels to his sociological analysis of slavery and philosophy of freedom. And Steinmetz (2013; 2019) 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 the specific ethos of Black Studies, which impels us to contextualize struggles over knowledge formation as part of struggles for, against, and over Black community (see for example James 2000). 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 Patterson's early works leading up to *Slavery and Social Death* and consider how they laid a path towards his celebrated concept. 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. While there is a necessary biographical element to my engagement with Patterson, I am less interested in individual intention (or moral judgment) and more interested in excavating structural exclusions and responses to those exclusions which are of relevance to Black Studies.

The aim of this article is to interrogate the politics implicated in particular concept formations and how those politics inform our diasporic confrontations with what Hartman (2007) 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. Moreover, I propose that the efficacy of social death as an explanatory concept should be adjudicated through the rationalities of the Black movements for self-determination of concern to Patterson—movements that have been categorized as 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 urbanizing 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 in his judgment 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 American urban sociology. I show how Patterson combines United States 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 logics 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 that comprises the Rastafari movement and through which the movement is, in good part, 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

Orlando Patterson came of intellectual age in the late 1950s/early 1960s 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, prepared a letter to Fidel Castro, inviting him to take over Jamaica as Henry's faithful were due to set sail for the African continent. Henry was trialed for treason and convicted. In the meantime, Henry's son, a U.S. ex-Marine, had 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 (see Chevannes 1976).

Although the Rastafari movement was only tangentially involved in this particular confrontation, it did further sour the political mood against them. In the same year, Arthur Lewis, Principal of the University College of West Indies at the time, directed certain faculty to undertake an examination of the movement with an eye to its government-directed rehabilitation (Dijk 1995; Paul and Hill, 2013). For their part, Rastafari stalwarts, such as Mortimo Planno, were concerned with state and society better understanding their demands for repatriation. 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 therefore be said that Jamaican independence pivoted largely on the violent disciplining of the Rastafari movement. 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 fifteen to twenty thousand Rastafari congregated in Kingston's overcrowded informal settlements (Nettleford 1970; Scott 2013). 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 (Scott 2013). Patterson 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 (see Steinmetz 2013). In Britain's imperial academy, social anthropology was ascendent within sociology (see Kuklick 1991). 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 (see Holmwood 2005). 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 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 (1945), 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 led the "changing native" to ascribe to pathological ideologies, such as Black nationalism, which challenged the integrity of imperial order (Foks 2018; Shilliam 2019).

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 M. G. Smith, who was lead academic of the Rastafari Report. Smith had written a PhD at SOAS University of London 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 (Steinmetz 2019). 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 (Mair 1959). Patterson's wife, Nerys Patterson, was supervised by Isaac Schapera, another Malinowskian-influenced social anthropologist of southern African tribal systems (Schapera 1959; see also Scott 2013). Incidentally, Nerys Patterson was responsible for guiding her husband through the "more esoteric aspects" of African kinship systems (Patterson 1967, p. 12).

### 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" (Patterson 1970, p. 292). Against this definition, 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" (Patterson 1967, p. 70).

Of fundamental importance to the argument in *Sociology of Slavery* is the claim that such ill-organization was due to a lack of "settled habits of morality and order" amongst slaves and masters albeit for different reasons (Patterson 1967, p. 38). On the one hand, White men visited sexual violence and rape upon Black women (Patterson 1967). On the other hand, because status and divisions within and between slaves were defined for them by local White elites, any extant social sanctions pertaining to sexual behavior broke down (Patterson 1967).

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 (Patterson 1970). 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 (1967), were distinct from Africans in so far as they collectively exhibited a "broken trauma-ridden personality" and a general attitude of "total indifference" (p. 151).

To further clarify this distinction between Creole and African we can briefly consider Patterson's 1972 novel, *Die the Long Day*, a creative accompaniment to his historical research on slave revolts. Near the end of the story, Patterson (1973) has Africanus, the continental-born Obeah man, counsel Cicero, the creole, thus:

[I]t'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 (p. 253).

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 (1967) 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. Moreover, Patterson identifies in this Creole pathology a postcolonial fate. Writing a few years after independence, Patterson (1965a) claims that Jamaica does not possess an "integrated culture rooted in a past having some degree of continuity" (p. 35). The 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" (Patterson 1965a, p. 42).

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 (1967), must lie “outside the framework of the sociologist” in an existentialist inquiry into the human condition, inspired by the writings of Albert Camus, and which rests upon the imperative that acts upon all individuals to become free (p. 282).

Here, a central paradox emerges. 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 Patterson’s famous 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 (see Scott 2013). Patterson also seems to model Brother Solomon on another Rastafari notable, Mortimo Planno, who came to be associated with the University College 1960 report, and with whom Patterson had personal encounters. Brother Solomon, like Planno, is a well-read intellectual and a worldly seer (Patterson 2012; Scott 2013). As a leader of the Dungle-dwelling Rastafari, Brother Solomon takes upon himself the burden of fulfilling the prophecy of repatriation to Ethiopia.

The novel’s plot 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 lives.

Patterson presents this moment of deception by way of his reading of the moment of meaningfulness that Camus (2004) 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 (2004), rests on the ability to contemplate suicide seriously—that is, to judge “whether life is or is not worth living” (p. 495). In the end, Brother Solomon commits suicide. However, Patterson infers that this act is a “comic” rather than tragic repetition (Patterson 2012, p. 212). Apparently, a belief in salvation as repatriation to Africa cannot cultivate consciousness but can only socio-psychologically displace a confrontation with the Sisyphian 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 (1955) 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 (1964) claims that Rastafari suffer not simply from economic poverty but from status poverty—“intense role deprivation” (p. 17). 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 (Patterson 1964, pp. 15-17).

Clearly, Patterson renders Blackness—especially in terms of a collective commitment to African redemption—as a pathology, 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 (see also Patterson 1965b).

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 reason truly absent from these aspirations? 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 2012, pp. 210–211). Patterson (1964) also admits that when it comes to world affairs—and here he name checks Mortimo Planno—Rastafari are “unusually well informed” (p. 17). Incidentally, Planno was part of a Black internationalist network of activists and thinkers, including a London-based Rastafari, Jah Bones (Homiak 2013). Here is Jah Bones' critical reflection on Claudius Henry:

On the topic of repatriation InI learned well enough from the manifestations of ... Claudius Henry self-styled repairer 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 (Bones 1985, p. 36).

This reasoning seems to fall far from the obliviousness that Patterson has Brother Solomon embrace. Rather, amongst the Rastafari, repatriation seems to be a political project deliberately and deliberately pursued.<sup>1</sup>

### **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 Institute (Lindner 2006). Only later did Park read Malinowski. That said, Park's 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 modifies the characteristics and aptitudes of the group undergoing change (Park and Burgess, 1979, p. 196; Park 1914, p. 607).

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 imperfectly (Park 1919, p. 111). “Primitive” groups, claims Park (1919), are able to incorporate the “external forms” of civilization far more easily than the “aims, attitudes, sentiments” that underly them (p. 115). Park argues that in crossing the Atlantic the enslaved African “left behind almost everything but his dark

complexion and his tropical temperament” (Park 1919, p. 118). 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 temperament (Park 1919, p. 123).

Franklin Frazier uses Park’s framework to adduce the civilizational trajectory of the Black family in the United States. Frazier (1940) 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” (p. 21). Additionally, Frazier (1940) 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 (p. 31). 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” (Frazier 1940, pp. 290, 481).

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 (1940) speaks of “tribeless men” (p. 285) who have lost “much of their naïve outlook on life and have become sophisticated in the ways of the city” (p. 290). Falling into illicit pursuits, these men extend an “individuated” and “purely rational attitude” to women, whereby “sexual gratification” becomes commodified (p. 285). 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 1940, p. 481). Frazier looks toward 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 (Frazier 1940). Ultimately, Frazier promotes a class politics underwritten by patriarchal family life as redress for 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 in 1957. Under the Council’s auspices, she undertook one of the first systemic studies on the family in the English-speaking Caribbean (see Bush 2013). Clarke’s research was, in Patterson’s words, “very important” for his early work (Scott 2013, p. 160).

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 (Clarke 1999, p. 2). 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 (Clarke 1999, p. 3). 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” (Clarke 1999, p. 4). When Clarke surveys the diversity of family life in contemporary Jamaica, her normative reference point is this post-emancipation patriarchal peasantry.

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 (1967) 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,” thereafter developing the “irresponsible parental and sexual attitudes that are to be found even today” (pp. 167-168). 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 (see Scott 2013).

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 (1972) 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” (Patterson 1972, p. 35). 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 nonetheless 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” (Patterson 1972, pp. 35-36). 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” (p. 38). They are, in fact, one of the only segments of the West Indian masses that suffer from “a sense of loss and of isolation” (p. 38). 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” (Patterson 1972, p. 38). Through such irrationality they assert an identity with Africa. We return 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 his conceptual universalizing of a previously 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 in his philosophical musings on freedom in the afterlives of slavery, both of which ultimately comprise what might be called an eschatology of slavery.

Firstly, Patterson asserts that slavery destroyed African modes of family life and behavioral patterns. Secondly, and relatedly, 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 underpinned social solidarity in these contexts were either “wholly Christian” or “peculiarly black American” (which in the final analysis, and similar to Park, is a gloss on European religiosity) (Patterson 1972, p. 47).

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 (Patterson 1972, p. 46). 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 (Patterson 1972).

Fourthly, Patterson urges that Blacks “must abandon their search for a past [and] recognize they lack all claims to a distinctive cultural heritage” (1972, p. 60). In doing so, he proposes that 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” (p. 60). This would be 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” (Patterson 1972, p. 60).

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” (Bodel and Scheidel, 2016, p. 11; Patterson 1979).

So let us be clear about the nature of this death. First of all, 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” (Patterson 1982, p. 5 my emphasis). “Humanized fictive kinship,” Patterson claims, is not the same as “claims and obligations of real kinship or with those involving genuine adoption” (1982, p. 63). Real and genuine, here, mean 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 enforceable ties of “blood” (see Patterson 1982). The latter, as we have seen in Patterson’s prior work, almost always invokes a patriarchal question of the standing of the 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).

With these specifications, Patterson (1982) provides his famous definition of slavery as “the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons” (p. 13). But as universal as that definition presents, 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 supposedly 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

Remember 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. Even the doctrines, morality, and principles of Black Christianity, he moots, are sourced from Europe (see also Scott 2013). Well, these philosophical commitments to European Christianity are advanced in a book Patterson 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” (Patterson 1977, p. 19). With this provocation, Patterson (1977) 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” (pp. 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 (Patterson 1977). Zion, as Patterson puts it, is the answer to exile (as is proclaimed by Rastafari). Nonetheless, Patterson is adamant that industrial civilization undermines all old faiths in so far as it is an intrinsically secular movement. In modern 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 (Patterson 1977, p. 279).

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” (Patterson 1977, p. 217). However, Patterson (1977) acknowledges that the “symbolic structure of Christianity” was globalized through the slave experience (p. 233). 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 (1982) 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 (Patterson 1977, p. 280).

The internal logic of Patterson's eschatology of slavery might be sound. My point, however, is that 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 rather than pathology. I have argued so far that 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. And it is this refusal that is consequential for Black Studies, less so the internal logic of Patterson's eschatology. What difference would it make if we examined the movement of Rastafari through Rastafari reason?

### **Pinnacle and Self-determination**

Kwame Dawes (2012) observes that *Children of Sisyphus* is perhaps the first piece of Jamaican literature wherein the protagonists are presented as "wholly city people" (p. 8). But in fact, Rastafari Studies has conclusively demonstrated that Rastafari culture has developed in a coming-and-going between 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" (Homiak 2013, p. 59). 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 (see Post 1981).

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 on more than 150 acres. While repatriation was an early aim of the Rastafari movement (and it remains so), Daive Dunkley (2018) 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, charcoaling, 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 (Dunkley 2021).

Much of the oscillation of Rastafari between rural and urban milieus was due to cyclical and destructive police raids on Pinnacle, with special focus on its Marijuana trade (Niaah 2016). 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 (2021) 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" (Dunkley 2012, p. 15). 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 (Bones 1985, p. 28).

In his interview with David Scott (2013), 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 emphasizes how popular fears of Rastafari emerged from a sensational bearded serial killer, Whappy King, who hung for his crimes 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 (see Alvaranga et al., 1961). Rastafari self-organized and self-funded another informal Mission to Africa in 1965. In Rex Nettleford’s (1970) opinion, “this exercise...betrayed an understanding on the part of some of the movement’s leading members of the practical considerations relating to repatriation” (p. 72), with the brethren on this trip travelling with a list comprising the skills and occupations of thousands 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 movement that is strikingly congruent to Patterson’s yet does not require the pathologization of Black community nor the excision of African retentions in the progressive struggle over modernity.

### Rastafari Reason and Freedom

Between 1840 and 1865 tens of thousands of enslaved Africans aboard ships “liberated” by the British royal navy were re-routed to the Caribbean as indentured laborers (see Asiegbu 1969; Schuler 1980). 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 (Stewart 2004, p. 144). 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 (Bilby and Bunseki, 1983; Schuler 1980). 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” (Stewart 2004, p. 145; Warner-Lewis 1977, p. 77).

Leonard Howell recruited his Rastafari followers heavily from St. Thomas, a part of Jamaica where recaptives settled and where Kumina flourished (Hutton 2015). 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 (School of Sacrament Rastafari University 2021). At least one Rastafari leader who left Pinnacle in 1951 was known as a “Kumina Queen” (Dunkley 2021, p. 97). 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 (see Dunkley 2021).

Kumina most probably introduced a key logic into existing strands of Ethiopianism that ultimately distinguished Rastafari from other biblical-based diasporic faiths. Clinton Hutton (2015), 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 seek direct communion with the ultimate creating force. Nevertheless, direct intercession is a component of some African-derived ancestor veneration, albeit only to be used in circumstances of extreme danger (Ikenga-Metuh 1982). In Howell’s era, Kumina people referred to Haile Selassie I as “Nzambi Mpungu,” the ultimate spiritual agent of Bakongo cosmology (Hutton 2015). If Kumina cast ancestry 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 (on Empress Menen, see Kush 2019).

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 (Bilby and Leib, 1983). Pa-Ashanti, an original master-drummer of the Nyahbinghi order, claimed that he earned his early reputation playing Kumina instruments (Homiak 1989). 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 (Tafari 2021). 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 (Chevannes 1998; Rowe 1998). Some, who undertook another Pinnacle-like marronage in the Wairaka hills of east Kingston, developed the language of Rastafari further (see Homiak 1998). Through this relatively short yet intense period of urban/peri-urban/rural 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 (see McFarlane 1998). 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” (see Roberts 2014), 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.

Michael Barnett (2008) 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 purportedly given to Rastafari directly by Haile 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 in 1935 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 (see Shilliam 2013). Kumina helps the Diasporic supporters of Ras Tafari (a title given to Haile Selassie I prior to his emperorship) 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 “duppy” (a ghost) but none other than “the Almighty I”; and when Rastafari declare Haile Selassie I or Empress Menen I, the roman numeral is oftentimes substituted for the pronoun sound of “I” (see also Wint and Nyabinghi Order 1998).

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 developed within modernity. Yet consider the following. Kumina, an *African* healing system, was introduced *after* emancipation. Through the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth 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 solely with slavery *nor* with 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 becoming more urban than rural; and in this shift, as I have noted, the movement became far more patriarchal in its organizational norms, even providing openings for abusive relationships (see, instructively, Miller 2006). But despite this turn in the movement, a strong sense of non-patriarchal familiarity remained and by the 1980s was resurgent amongst Rastafari women (see Alhassan 2020; Beresford 2020; Davis 1988; Tafari-Ama 2012). This was a relationality that followed African conceptions and configurations of family as “flexible and expansive,” “adoptive, corporate, spiritual, and intellectual” as well as biological (Sweet 2013, p. 253), and that relied just as much upon community rebuilding as upon filial genealogy (see Brodber 2012; Brown 2009).

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 Jake Homiak—remembers an old Nyabinghi 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 once said “I don’t have legitimate kids, you are all Howell” (School of Sacrament Rastafari University 2021).

## Conclusion

Sorentino (2016) is right to examine the motility and salience of social death by way of the 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 social death has no analytical purchase in confronting the horrors of slavery

and its afterlives (see, instructively, Turner 2017). It cannot and should not be an easy task to dispense intellectually with social death. 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. Indeed, we should take care in not erasing particular diasporic communities and their political 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 to repurpose the Black family as an ethical agent of self-determination and reparation. His eschatology of social death and modern freedom rests upon an analytical (and perhaps normative) dismissal of such attempts. And along the way, Patterson involved himself in debates about other Black families—with Daniel Moynihan for example.

Was Patterson wrong to scrutinize certain attitudes and behaviors evident amongst Rastafari, which fell short of or compromised the principles and precepts of the movement? Not at all. But it is striking that in all his scholarship that leads up to *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson persistently presents either a chronological and/or synchronous segregation of Black social groupings into "proper" and "pathological." For instance, we come across contrasts between Africans 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 reminded of the refusal by a new generation of gender-queer Black Lives activists and organizers to submit to the paternal propriety of older civil rights struggles (see Cohen and Jackson, 2016). 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 against/besides/over social death.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In my correspondence with Jake 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 other words, Rastafari in the 1950s wished to extract practical knowledge of African societies from Simpson to aid in their deliberations over repatriation.

<sup>2</sup> 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*.



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