Unlearning White Superiority

Consciousness-raising on an online Rastafari Reasoning Forum

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Emancipate yourself from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our minds

Bob Marley
Abstract

This thesis is based on participant observation on a Rastafari discussion forum on the internet, run by a Trinidadian organization dedicated to personal empowerment and spiritual development, as well as to collective Black liberation and social justice. Black experiences and analysis of racism, as well as personal and political strategies to resist it, are central topics of discussion. The forum is primarily oriented towards Diaspora Blacks, but there are also a number of white Rastas who tend to downplay the significance of white racism and Black resistance. The ensuing interracial dialogues on racism are the main focus of my thesis. Most whites define racism as prejudice and discrimination, and suggest good intentions and “colorblindness” as a solution, while Blacks define it in terms of group dominance, structural inequality and cultural hegemony. Black Rastas point out that whites tend to show dominating behavior in the discussions, and see this as a reflection of a “white superiority complex.” Black Rastas consistently confront whites and hold them responsible for their conduct, although it is usually unintended and unconscious. Through this confrontation, many whites become aware of their taken-for-granted ‘white privilege’ and start “unlearning white superiority.”

Rastafari resists the hegemonic ideology in two ways. It resists cultural imperialism by rejecting the imposition of a Eurocentric definition of reality on Blacks. Eurocentric knowledge claims are delegitimized when they fail to meet the criteria of an alternative Rasta epistemology where knowledge must be experience-based and morally engaged. Allegedly universal and objective knowledge claims are exposed as a reflection of the experiences and interests of privileged whites. Rastafari also rejects the competitive logic of capitalism and imperialism, which justifies that the stronger defeats the weaker. Instead, Rastafari promotes a spiritually informed ethics of peace and love, combined with uncompromising integrity in the face of opposition. As a Black liberation movement, Rastafari represents the struggle of one of the most oppressed groups, the descendents of African slaves in the Americas, fighting for their human dignity. In our common struggle for social justice, we may have some things to learn from the insights of the most oppressed, as our global community is no better than how it treats its lowest class.
Acknowledgements

Although I alone am responsible for this thesis, it is also the result of a collective effort, and I would like to thank those whose ideas have inspired me as well as those who have supported me throughout the writing process.

I would like to thank my family, friends and co-students (you know who you are) for having endured my countless discussions.

I am grateful to Halvard Vike for support and good advice, and especially for helping me translate my oftentimes polemical arguments into anthropological analysis.

The people at the Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum will be credited for their statements throughout the thesis. The images on the front page I have borrowed from the Africa Speaks website at www.africaspeaks.com.

In solidarity with those fighting against oppression, I hope this thesis may be a contribution, however small, to the global struggle for social justice and human dignity.

Christian Stokke
April 2005
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Epistemology and Eurocentrism 7
Alternative epistemologies 9
Intersecting oppressions 10
Hegemony and resistance 12
Towards a decolonized anthropology 16
The critical study of racism 19
Structure of thesis 21

Chapter 2: The Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum

My fieldwork on the Reasoning Forum 24
The Africa Speaks Community 26
Administrators and moderators 27
Other participants 29
The digital divide 31
Purpose and focus of the discussion forum 33
Privacy policy on the forum 34

Chapter 3: The Symbolic Dimension of Rastafari

Dread Talk 38
I-words 40
Deconstructed words 42
Symbolic concepts beyond language 42
Symbolic resistance 46
Beyond symbolism 49
Chapter 4:  
Reasoning on the Internet

Reasoning and consciousness-raising 52
The internet and the real world 56
Critical discourse analysis 59
Trust 62
Negotiating a credible identity 64
Personal experience and integrity 66
Revealing “hidden” racism 68

Chapter 5:  
White Supremacy 71

Racism and colorism in the Americas 72
Structural racism 74
Eurocentrism – projecting white as normal 76
Colorism – light-skin preference and privilege 80

Chapter 6:  
The Black Liberation Movement 82

Black social movements 82
Black Nationalism and ‘white Rastas’ 84
The colorblind ideology 86
The essentialist debate 87
Race or integrity? 88
The personal dimension 90
Connecting political ideology and personal behavior 92
Leadership and autonomy of struggle 96
A role for whites in the Black liberation struggle 99

Chapter 7:  
The White Superiority Complex 101

Forms of everyday racism 101
Ignorance and denial of racism 103
Claiming “reverse” racism 105
Claiming oppression 108
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entitlement and arrogance</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternalism</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconscious racism and consciousness-raising</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Development</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey’s development</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iyah360’s development</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Zion’s development</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stages in the development of white antiracists</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism and anti-Semitism</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society produces evil</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting socialization</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal integrity and social justice</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlearning White Superiority</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
Introduction

*Rastafarianism is one of the most complex and insightful reactions to colonialism and the oppression of Blacks.*

Kwame Dawes (2003: ix)

*Rastafari ... offers a philosophy and a critical social theory of the present local and world order, which appear more relevant and persuasive to many than ... Marxism or Liberalism.*

Dennis Forsythe (1999: x)

In the modern age, Europe has sought and largely achieved imperial domination over the world. The material development of modern Europe depended on the military conquest, economic exploitation and enslavement of Africa and its people. (Rodney 1972) This was accompanied by the cultural construction of a modern European identity in opposition to supposedly inferior racial and cultural others, especially Africans. Imperialism, racism and slavery were thus integral to the formation of Western modernity. (Gilroy 1993) Eurocentric conceptions of ‘civilization’, ‘progress’, ‘development’ and ‘humanism’ served to reinforce a sense of superiority among Europeans, but have also produced feelings of inferiority among non-white people to the extent that Europe has succeeded in imposing these ideas on its dominated others. On the other hand, the attempted universalization of Eurocentric modernity has always been met with various forms of resistance. The forced dislocation from Africa and subsequent suffering under capitalist racial slavery in the Americas places Diaspora Blacks among the colonized peoples who have had to endure the greatest assaults on their cultural traditions. Black slaves and their descendents in the Americas may have been the first group to become thoroughly ‘modernized’, and were faced with typical ‘postmodern’ problems of identity, arising out of their physical displacement and cultural alienation, earlier than many Europeans. (ibid.) This historical background has produced some interesting forms of resistance in the African Diaspora. Although usually invoking African
traditions, Black resistance may be better characterized as ‘postmodern’ rather than pre-modern or traditional. While the social forms of African culture were largely destroyed by slavery, a range of cultural features from West African traditions survived slavery (Herskovits 1941), and some of the strongest African survivals are in the realm of religion. African slaves and their descendents were able to preserve many of their ancestral spiritual practices while outwardly converting to Christianity. Both European and African traditions were reinterpreted and transformed in the light of slave experience. Religion thus has a special significance in the Black Diaspora as a platform from which to mobilize resistance against European cultural imperialism. (Edmonds 2003) A significant surviving feature of African culture is the reluctance to separate religion from politics and everyday life. Socio-political struggle against racial oppression thus converged with religion. (Hall 1985)

Out of this historical context emerges the Rastafari movement (Edmonds 2003), the subject of the current thesis. From the 1950s onwards, anthropologists and sociologists have been struggling to come to terms with this movement, approaching it from a range of different theoretical perspectives, often producing great controversy over the ‘correct’ interpretation and significance of the movement. E.B. Edmonds (ibid.) identifies five distinct approaches to the study of Rastafari. The early studies conducted by George Eaton Simpson, Leonard Barrett and Orlando Patterson in the 1950s and 1960s, interpreted Rastafari as a millenarian cult, and presented the movement as escapist rather than revolutionary. According to Edmonds (ibid.), these scholars tended to view opposition to the status quo as pathological. The famous 1960 UWI Report on the movement, conducted by Rex Nettleford, M.G. Smith and Roy Augier, was more sympathetic to the movement and accepted the legitimacy of some of Rastafari’s criticisms of the dominant powers of society. (ibid.) A second approach (Nettleford 1972, 1978, Campbell 1985) interpreted Rastafari as a movement of resistance against social inequality, but had a tendency to ignore its spiritual aspects. The third perspective (Owens 1976, Chevannes 1994) focuses on the movement’s ideological and symbolic meanings, but somewhat neglects the material dimension. These three ‘outsider’ approaches, by scholars who are not themselves Rastafari, thus have a
tendency to reductionism, seeing the movement as an inverted imitation of the Christian religion, a potential political party, or primarily as engaged in ‘identity politics’.

All three approaches point to important dimensions of the movement, yet most Rastas would say that Rastafari is neither ‘religion’, ‘politricks’ nor mere ‘symbols without substance’. Ayinde, one of my key ‘informants’, points out that “Rastafari in essence is a spiritual thing, Rastafari as a movement is a Black liberation struggle and Rastafari lacking the understanding of the spiritual aspects and its earthly movement is strictly cosmetic/fashionable.” Rastafari can thus be interpreted as consisting of three interrelated dimensions, which we may call the symbolic, the socio-political, and the spiritual. As pointed out above, in African cultural thought, religion and politics are better understood as aspects of everyday life rather than as separate institutionalized spheres. The attempts of social scientists to analyze the movement as primarily a religious cult, a political movement or a symbolic system can thus be seen as reflections of Eurocentric thinking (Gilroy 1982, 1987), at times revealing more about the researcher’s bias than of Rastafari. (Tafari 2002) However, scholars within the movement also tend to focus primarily either on spirituality (Forsythe 1999) or on the socio-political movement (Tafari 2002). These two insider’s approaches, which represent the last two of the five perspectives identified by Edmonds (2003), can be understood as a reflection of a certain polarization between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ within the movement itself. This polarization, however, should not be exaggerated because most Rastas conceive of Black liberation and African spirituality as intimately connected. My Rasta ‘informants’ emphasize that socio-political activism and spiritual development are equally important and cannot be separated.

The present thesis is based on participant observation on the Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum on the internet. This Rastafari-oriented discussion forum and the surrounding network of websites are run by the Self Empowerment Learning Fraternity (SELF), a Black non-profit organization based on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. SELF is dedicated to personal empowerment and spiritual development as well as to collective Black liberation and social justice, which are seen as intimately, linked. Black experiences and analyses of racism, as well as personal and political
strategies to resist it, are central topics of discussion. The forum is oriented primarily towards Diaspora Blacks, and most participants are Afro-Caribbean and African American people. However, many white Americans, Europeans and Australians are attracted to Rastafari, and many Rastafari websites on the Internet seem to be run by ‘white Rastas’ who emphasize Bob Marley and Rasta symbolism while downplaying the significance of white racism and Black resistance which is the original context of Rastafari. While most white-dominated Rastafari websites seem not to address racism to any great extent, the Africa Speaks website allows white participants to engage in discussions of racism with Blacks.

These interracial dialogues on racism constitute an interesting ethnographic phenomenon, which will be the main focus of my thesis. These meetings between Black nationalists and white liberals usually start with a confrontation between two opposing perspectives on racism and anti-racism. One perspective is influenced by attempts to avoid being (accused of being) racist while the other is based on personal experiences of racial discrimination. The first defines racism as prejudice and intentionally discriminating behavior of individuals and primarily suggests good intentions and “colorblindness” as the solution, while the other perspective perceives racism primarily in terms of group dominance, structural inequality, and cultural hegemony. Black participants consistently point out to whites that they show dominating behavior towards Blacks in the discussions, and relate this to structural racism as well as to internalized assumptions of superiority. The tendency of whites to attempt to dominate and control Blacks is often seen as a reflection of a “white superiority complex” by Black Rastas on the forum, echoing a number of Black scholars of racism such as Frantz Fanon (1967) who apply this concept. On the Reasoning Forum, Blacks consistently challenge ‘white Rastas’ whenever they act or speak in a ‘superior’ manner. These behaviors and attitudes are often unconscious and unintended, but white people are still held responsible for their conduct. Black Rastas emphasize that only by rooting out habitual behavior and taken-for-granted assumptions can racism be effectively fought. Through this confrontation, many whites become aware of their taken-for-granted skin color privileges and start a process of “unlearning white superiority.”

Social movement theorist Alberto Melucci (ibid.) has identified certain features characteristic of ‘new’ social movements, which may serve as an analytical framework for the Rastafari movement. He writes that the demands of ‘new’ social movements are typically non-negotiable, and they refuse mediation of these by the political system. These movements primarily aim for autonomy rather than political power within the system. While traditional Marxists have often seen this characteristic as a weakness, Melucci emphasizes that this may also be a potential strength in that it provides a group identity that helps mobilize for collective action. Internal solidarity often takes primacy over outward-directed political behavior, and direct action is preferred to representative politics. Further, these movements have a perception of the human body as a part of nature, providing a social ecology and an alternative rationality that challenges the exploitation and domination of nature both within and outside of persons. The struggle for recognition of oppressed subject’s humanity is a central focus in Black movements as well as in movements for Women’s and Gay liberation. Lastly, these movements often have a spiritual component which provides for a moral authority opposing the logic of secular, instrumental rationality prevalent in capitalism and the political system. Human emancipation is understood holistically as self development rather than as the pursuit of material interests. (Cox 1999) Social movements organized around racial identity, including Rastafari and other Black liberation movements, exhibit all the above characteristics. (Gilroy 1987, Farrar 1999)
Paul Gilroy (1993) writes that Black social movements generally have a twofold agenda. These two aspects, the elaboration of a symbolic Black identity, and opposition against racism, are compatible but not synonymous. Social movement theory seems to fit an analysis of Rastafari in being able to address the symbolic, the spiritual, and the socio-political dimensions without reducing the movement to either one of them, as was the problem with the approaches discussed above. The concept of ‘new’ social movements was developed as a critique of traditional Marxism’s separation of the analysis of social systems from the analysis of individual and collective social actors, which often led Marxists to neglect the personal dimension in favor of the political. (Gilroy 1987, Kearney 1996) ‘New’ social movements organized around race and gender, redefine personal identity and address issues of culture and representation as well as the social structure. While many theorists have represented the cultural focus of ‘new’ social movements as an alternative rather than as an additional dimension to the political focus of ‘old’ social movements organized around class, Black and Women’s liberation movements often have a complementary focus on both institutional transformations and on autonomous cultural identities. (Collins 2000, Scott 1990)

‘New’ social movements, including Rastafari, often reject formal institutions and prefer to organize as networks of personal relationships. While scattered throughout the Caribbean islands and beyond, Rastas have a long tradition of frequent informal contacts, through which they share information and maintain a sense of collective belonging. (Edmonds 1998b, 2003) These kinds of networks of informal relations connecting the spatially dispersed members of the Black Diaspora resemble the organizational forms of the internet, thus making online discussion forums a suitable form of organizing Black social movements. (Kearney 1996) The Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum thus facilitates solidarity among the dispersed members of the Black Diaspora, as well as providing a site for regional and global dialogues on racism which may include persons from all continents. Other ‘new’ social movement, often with related agendas, such as the ‘anti-globalization movement’ (Escobar 2004), also coordinate global networks of activists through the internet. An analysis of the Black Diaspora and its social movements shows that neither globalization, ‘new’ social movements, ‘postmodern’ identities nor networks as a form of social
organization are as recent developments as we are sometimes led to believe. Indeed, Black activists such as Marcus Garvey, have traveled across the Atlantic Ocean by ship since the days of slavery, connecting the Caribbean islands with each other and with North America, Europe and Africa in organizational networks. (Gilroy 1993) While early Internet theorists ascribed to the new media technology a capability to create completely new forms of social interaction, conceptualized as ‘cyberspace’ and ‘virtual communities’, anthropological research has shown a great extent of continuity between Internet activity and the everyday lives of its users. Consequently, Internet communities may often have more similarities with face-to-face social interaction than expected. (Wilson and Peterson 2002)

**Epistemology and Eurocentrism**

Eurocentrism can be characterized as the knowledge form of modernity, a hegemonic representation and mode of knowing that claims universality for itself. (Escobar 2004) It functions to project European experiences as if they were universal, by disguising the inevitable subjectivity of all perspectives behind an illusion of objectivity. Depending on the extent that people believe in its objectivity, Eurocentric knowledge is an effective weapon for cultural imperialism. (Ani 1994) As Eurocentric knowledge is often presented in the form of abstract theoretical models, its claims can be difficult to disconfirm by experience. Eurocentrism is an aspect of the system of white supremacy (Mills 2003), as educated elites typically claim that only they are qualified to produce knowledge and can interpret everybody else’s experiences, and often use this belief to uphold their own privilege. Although originally constructed by white men, persons of any race, class or gender have been enlisted to enforce the power relations of Eurocentric epistemologies. Conversely, a number of white men participate in the revolt and subversion of these power structures. (Collins 2000)

Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins (ibid.) identifies four epistemological requirements in Eurocentric knowledge. These include a detached distance between subject and object of knowledge, the absence of personal and emotional involvement in research, the definition of
morality and politics as irrelevant, and the establishment of truth through adversarial debate. These requirements are most clearly spelled out in positivist approaches, but they are also commonly accepted as ideals in other paradigms. Three sub-perspectives can be identified within the Eurocentric framework. Positivism is most clearly Eurocentric, and was developed by elite white men who claimed that they had access to an absolute truth which they could objectively represent, while disregarding the experiences of other groups. The alternative approaches of Marxism and postmodernism replicate some of the problems of positivism. Marxist standpoint epistemology reverses its theory of who has access to objective truth, which according to Marxism are those most oppressed, but replicates the positivist belief in objective knowledge and absolute truth. Postmodernist epistemology rejects the assumptions of an objective truth, but its relativism often tends to deny truth as such. (Collins 2000) While postmodern relativism attacks Eurocentric conceptions of rationality and universality, its consideration of any ethical-political position as equally valid is problematic. (Gilroy 1993)

In current anthropology, the idea of the “politically detached” social scientist whose work is “free of value-judgment,” has been exposed as a myth, and claims of ‘objectivity’ are becoming increasingly difficult to make in the face of the growing acknowledgement of the political nature of European social theory. (Ani 1994) Cultural relativism, which has largely replaced positivism, however, tends to reserve for the anthropologist a neutral position outside of relativity, thus replicating a positivist assumption of objectivity. Allegedly neutral descriptions in anthropology tend to be defended either on the basis of claims to rationality and objectivity (D’Andrade 1995), or on the basis of a Western humanism which confuses Western values with universal values. (Schepers-Hughes 1995) As an alternative to claiming this impossible neutrality, we may acknowledge that interpretations are always influenced by the interpreter’s background, and that subjectivism does not reduce the quality or truthfulness of a description. The representation of distant places requires a high level of conscious reflection and acknowledgement of the relationship between the observer and the observed, because ordinary checks and balances are absent from the communicative situation. (Tvedt 2004) While participant observation involves personal experience, empathy and dialogue with one’s informants, the production of
anthropological knowledge often demands a degree of alienation from personal experience and political action in order to produce credible intellectual work. (Collins 2000)

**Alternative epistemologies**

While Eurocentric epistemology makes claims for the separation of experience, knowledge and action, Rasta epistemology seeks to bring being, knowing and doing into alignment. (McFarlane 1998) The common Rasta phrase *Who feels it, knows it* (Forsythe 1999) indicates a theory where knowledge is validated by experience. This form of empiricism opposes rationalist speculation as a means to achieve knowledge, and thus resembles the empirical orientation that distinguishes anthropology from more positivistic social sciences. Further, Rasta emphasis on personal integrity and responsibility indicates that the value of knowledge lies in its practical application. Persons are expected to translate their knowledge into action.

In its criticism of the Western separation of thinking and being (Gilroy 1993), Rasta epistemology resembles a “Black feminist epistemology” identified by Collins (ibid.), which grants credibility to truth claims by principles opposing Eurocentric epistemology. Here, knowledge is also validated by lived experience and connectedness, moral issues are integral to theory, personal accountability and responsibility is required, and truth is arrived at by reaching consensus through dialogue. According to Collins, the preference for connectedness and dialogue for methodological adequacy are rooted in an African tradition where people become more human and empowered primarily in the context of seeking harmony within a community. As these features have been characterized as typically female by feminist scholars, it seems unlikely that they are specifically African. Rather, experience-based and ‘connected’ epistemologies seem to be widely used by diverse groups of non-elite people in opposition to the ‘detached’ and objectivistic theories of knowledge that were constructed by elite white men as a claim to their own intellectual superiority.
However, as Gilroy (1993) points out, a Black feminist standpoint epistemology may run into two related problems. The first is a kind of Leninist vanguardism which argues for the necessity of intellectuals to articulate the experiences of Blacks and women and educate ordinary people to generate resistance. In the Black tradition of resistance, C.L.R. James has argued that ordinary people do not need an intellectual vanguard to help them speak or to tell them what to say. Second, whether mediated by intellectuals or not, experience-centered knowledge claims run the risk of merely replacing the standpoint of privileged white men with an equally positivistic standpoint of oppressed Black women. Gilroy views both Eurocentrism and Black Nationalism as unsatisfactory positions, and his theoretical attempt to go beyond them is paralleled in Rasta perspectives on the Reasoning Forum.

Rasta epistemology sees truth as equally accessible to each individual, and conceptualizes knowledge as forever incomplete. As a never-ending process aimed at elaborating intersubjective truths, *reasoning* is the Rasta way of constructing knowledge through constant evaluation and re-evaluation of personal experiences and general knowledge claims. We may thus regard Rastas as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense. Gilroy (ibid.) points out that the experiences of these intellectuals, located outside of privileged institutions, may give us certain insights into modernity. The Black perspective, forged out of the experiences of racial subordination, may thus be regarded as a privileged standpoint from which critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely.

**Intersecting oppressions**

Black feminists (Collins 2000, hooks 2000) have developed a theory of intersecting oppressions, referring to the overlapping hierarchies of race, class and gender. These three structural dimensions do not necessarily parallel one another and therefore cannot be reduced to one another. Neither can we make any a priori theoretical claims to the primacy of either one, as they vary empirically. Rather, the three dimensions of race, class and gender may be conceptualized as interrelated and interacting in complex ways, with a high degree of differentiation in how they
are experienced by individual persons. Thus, the actual experience of oppression defies any simple reductionist explanation of the type often suggested in classical Marxist theory. The concepts of race, class and gender are essentially of a different nature. The Marxist concept of class is strictly social, determined economically by a person’s position in the production process, or determined culturally by a person’s level of (formal) education. Race and gender, on the other hand, are cultural categories constructed on the basis of certain biological characteristics. Gender is based on the bipolar categories male and female, and although their naturalness is increasingly challenged, the overwhelming majority of persons fit easily into either one of them.

Race is a more problematic concept, because it does not have a biological basis in terms of genotype, despite early Western pseudo-scientific theories that have made such claims. (Rigby 1996) Inspired by the refutation of these theories, especially since the 1960s, anthropology has affirmed that ‘race’ does not exist. (Montagu 1964) Racism, however, the socially organized result of race thinking, continued to exist, but was now largely ignored in anthropology in favor of the concept ‘ethnicity’. (Sanjek 1994) As the African scholar Cheikh Anta Diop (1974) points out, the refutation of the biological existence of ‘race’ was easily translated into a denial of actually existing racism by losing out of sight that racial identity has a biological correspondent in phenotype, that is, physical appearances such as skin color, hair texture, and nose shape, on whose basis social groups continue to be discriminated. In the 1980s, the political right appropriated the originally progressive ideology of “colorblindness,” which seeks to fight racial discrimination by not acknowledging ‘racial’ categories, to attack race-based claims to equality such as affirmative action programs. (Sanjek 1994) However, despite these liberal claims, racial identities are not simply imagined identities in the consciousness of persons, but they also have a material reality to the extent that people experience phenotype-based privilege and discrimination. In social structures characterized by racial inequality, class is experienced in the form of race. (Gilroy 1987, 1993) Since ‘race’ has no genetic basis and skin color is a continuum from light to dark without clear-cut distinctions, we follow W.E.B. Du Bois in defining ‘race’ by the experience of racism. (Visweswaran 1998) It is thus the material position in a racial hierarchy that defines ‘race-in-itself’ while ‘race-for-itself’ refers to a self-conscious racial identity,
paralleling the Marxist distinction between materially defined ‘class-in-itself’ and class consciousness, ‘class-for-itself’ (Kearney 1996). Consequently, we may speak of whites as a social group even when the persons in question lack a self-conscious white identity and claim to be “colorblind” (Lewis 2003). Likewise, speaking of a Black racial identity based on individually differentiated, but common experiences of racism and class oppression does not imply that Blacks share a single or homogenous culture (Gilroy 1993). However, Blacks are currently more likely than whites to be race conscious because of their shared experiences with racial discrimination. The experience of racism creates a “perception gap” between Blacks and whites, so that the ‘racial’ specificity of whites is more visible to those who are not white. (Frankenberg 1993) This perception gap, based on the differential experiences of racism, defines my concepts of Black and white perspectives.

**Hegemony and resistance**

In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the concept of ‘double consciousness’ to refer to the ‘outsider-within’ location of Diaspora Blacks in the West. Double consciousness refers to the partial internalization of a white worldview, which causes Blacks to look at themselves through the eyes of others. Blacks experience modernity from a standpoint of dislocation, so that their perspective is an angle of vision held by oppressed people, looking upward from below. This Black standpoint is neither simply a disability nor a consistent privilege. However, it does represent a sensitized state of double vision internal to the West, which informs the critical theories of Black social movements struggling against racism and for Black autonomy. (Gilroy 1993)

Similarly, Marxist theory also operates with a dual model of consciousness, which distinguishes between ‘class consciousness’ determined by the experience of the material class position and ‘false consciousness’ based on the internalization of a hegemonic ideology. According to Gramsci, symbolic hegemony arises from ruling class control over the ideological means of production, including the church, education system, media and culture industry, which enslave
the oppressed classes at the level of ideas by indoctrinating them with ruling class ideology. (Scott 1985) However, hegemonic control can never be complete, not even in totalitarian societies, and will always be resisted in a variety of ways. The exact nature of resistance depends on the forms of dominance and expectations of how the elite may retaliate to resistance. During slavery, “everyday forms of resistance” (ibid.) were employed behind a seeming acceptance of the status quo. Black slaves in the Americas developed various ways to minimize their work effort, such as sabotage, carelessness and inefficiency (ibid.), and according to Black psychologist Na’im Akbar (1996), these forms of resistance still have a strong influence on African American attitudes towards work under modern capitalism. It is thus reasonable to interpret African American class (race) consciousness today in the context of centuries-long resistance against exploitation. In addition to the negligence of work, Black slaves also engaged in cultural resistance behind a mask of conformity (Scott 1985), such as practicing African rituals under the guise of Christianity. The attempted destruction of African cultural traditions thus succeeded only partially.

James Scott (ibid.) interprets these acts of individual resistance as aspects of class struggle even though they fail to change the social structure. He points out that these forms of everyday resistance are often generalized to coequals and those below in the form of cut-throat competition and gossip. In their struggle for survival, individuals thus resist all others. (Kearney 1996) This kind of everyday resistance is widespread in the Caribbean and conceptualized by Peter Wilson (1973) as Crab Antics. In Jamaica, where Rastafari originates, it is supported by the local folklore of Anancy, depicting a spider that employs trickery and deceit to outwit stronger animals. As a folk hero, Anancy represents an ethic of survival in a hostile environment. The “compliant” and “cunning” survival strategies of Anancy have their counterpart in the African American figure “Uncle Tom.” (Edmonds 2003, McFarlane 1998) Scott (ibid.) discusses whether these forms of everyday resistance disguised as compliance are in contradiction with the Marxist theory of ‘false consciousness’ and argues that although behavior seems to be determined by hegemonic expectations, oppression is not necessarily internalized at the level of consciousness. In other words, people may consciously resist hegemony even when they appear to be accepting it.
Rastafari rejects the ethic of survival which characterizes Anancy, and criticizes it for its dishonesty and lack of moral integrity. (Edmonds 2003) In Rastafari’s own theory of hegemony, resistance and ‘false consciousness’, Anancyism is identified with ‘mental slavery’ and it is argued that the capitalist system “has made us all into Ananey.” (Forsythe 1999) The Rasta theory of mental slavery recognizes a deeper level of ‘false consciousness’ than the acceptance of an inferior social position, in also rejecting the underlying ideology of competition which inevitably produces winners and losers. Seen from this perspective, individuals who seek to escape an inferior class position by “climbing the social ladder” are mentally enslaved, because they accept the legitimacy of the capitalist logic of individual competition for wealth and power. A large number of Blacks, among whom pop star Michael Jackson is sometimes cited as a prime example, seek to escape racial inferiority through “whitening strategies” such as skin-bleaching, hair-straightening, and even plastic surgery to remove their African features, as well as seeking light-skinned or white partners so as to guarantee their children more European features. These strategies testify to the sexualized nature of racism, which leads Black men to prefer light-skinned women, and Black women to attempt to bleach their skin. Underlying these Eurocentric ideals is a material reality where the ability to “pass for white” provides material benefits. (Collins 2000) While these strategies may be interpreted as individual attempts to escape racial inferiority, they simultaneously reinforce ideas of white superiority in their acceptance of Eurocentric norms. The Rasta response is to reject Eurocentric ideals and affirm the positive value of African identity.

Rasta critique of the hegemonic ideology encompasses two different but related aspects. First, it represents resistance against cultural imperialism, which Rasta social scientist Leahcim Semaj* defines as one group imposing its definition of reality on another. Cultural imperialism operates via metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, and can be more effective than overt material oppression which is usually met with resistance. (Edmonds 2003) While the church

*Leahcim Semaj spells his original name Michael James backwards, in defiance of the European ‘slave names’ imposed on Diaspora Africans. Thus, his name manifests resistance against cultural imperialism. (Edmonds 2003)
(Akbar 1996) and education system (Wilson 1993) produced widespread acceptance of European ideals during colonialism (Edmonds 2003), the main agent of cultural imperialism today is probably popular culture and the media. Black activists counter this by creating alternative media which present positive images of Africa. The websites run by the SELF represent an example of alternative media with its positive affirmation of African history, religion and culture, and critical analyses of the negative images of Africa presented in the mainstream Eurocentric media. Eurocentric knowledge claims are delegitimized when they fail to meet the criteria of an alternative epistemology where knowledge must be experience-based and morally engaged.

Second, Rastafari rejects the underlying logic of capitalism and imperialism where “might makes right.” The theory and ideology of liberal individualism, with its emphasis on ‘free competition’ and ‘individual choice’ effectively disguises the power structures which give certain groups a hidden advantage. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001) Since structural advantages and limitations on individual choice and free competition are disguised, ‘losers’ frequently blame themselves for their failures rather than recognizing that the system is unfair. (Doane 2003, Vetlesen and Henriksen 2003) Even when the myth of the level playing field is exposed as such, victims of discrimination may find little support from others who perceive themselves to be competitors rather than brothers and sisters in solidarity. While ‘factual’ statements of Eurocentric knowledge can be refuted by contrary empirical evidence, its underlying logic is more difficult to disprove. The Social Darwinist logic of the ‘survival of the fittest’ often seems to be confirmed by experience, making it difficult to imagine alternatives.

The Rasta alternative to the logic of violent competition is a spiritually informed ethics of peace and love. (McFarlane 1998) To steer clear of humble compliance, peace and love is combined with self-confidence and uncompromising integrity in the face of opposition, which is symbolized by the roaring lion. (Edmonds 2003) While rejecting their competitive logic, Rasta seeks to empower those who have internalized “Anancy” ideology by challenging their behavior pattern in verbal confrontation. (McFarlane 1998) This is what happens on the Reasoning Forum, when Rastas challenge and confront those who speak and act according to Eurocentric standards.
Like in other social movement networks, the online community of the Reasoning Forum allows individuals to have their personal experiences with racism validated by others with similar experiences, and develop a collective consciousness that can resist the hegemonic ideology. Often, collective experiences are articulated by organic intellectuals who provide information and alternative interpretations to promote critical consciousness. Rastafari reasoning can thus be interpreted in terms of Paulo Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization’, which refers to self-empowerment through consciousness-raising. (Murrell and Taylor 1998) Hence the name of the organization which runs these websites; Self Empowerment Learning Fraternity (SELF).

Towards a decolonized anthropology

A number of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said (1979) and Gilroy (1982, 1987, 1993) have brought an awareness of cultural imperialism and Eurocentrism into the mainstream academe. According to Robert Young (2001), postcolonial theory represents the intrusion of a radically different epistemology into the institutions of knowledge which had been dominated by Eurocentric knowledge criteria. Inspired by postcolonial theory, many anthropologists have turned critical attention to Western cultural hegemony and imperialism, as well as to other cultures’ resistance against and transformation of, Western concepts. (Stolcke 1995) Despite this growing acknowledgement, critical perspectives have often been included as alternative paradigms and added at the margins of academic disciplines rather than being allowed to transform hegemonic paradigms. Being contained in this way, these perspectives have not received the serious academic attention they deserve and demand from mainstream scholars, and continue to be marginalized fields engaging mostly non-white scholars.

Roy D’Andrade (1995) defends scientific rationality and ‘objectivity’ in anthropology. He defines the aspiration of objectivity as “wanting to tell others about the object, not about oneself.” He recognizes the following criticisms of objectivity; that the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity is flawed, that objectivity is therefore impossible and the pretense of it is hegemonic mystification, and that it is part of an oppressive and dehumanizing Western cultural hegemony.
While he largely dismisses these criticisms, he also admits that this moral model to a reasonable degree fits the analysis of racism and sexism. On the other hand, feminist anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) promotes an anthropology which is concerned “not only with how humans think but also with how they behave towards each other” and engages directly with questions of power and morality. She seeks to call the bluff of anthropology as neutral, rational and objective, and questions what makes anthropology exempt from the human responsibility to take ethical and political stands. She criticizes anthropology’s haughty distance from political engagement and its justifying moral and cultural relativism, which has returned with a vengeance in the rhetoric of liberal postmodernism. She points out that anthropologists’ fascination with symbolism blinds us to the materiality of human suffering, and encourages anthropologists to join the struggle against evil. Anthropologists’ theoretical abstractions and rhetoric serves to distance them from reality and minimize and deny suffering. Instead she suggests that we listen and observe carefully and with empathy and compassion.

D’Andrade criticizes the moral model promoted by Scheper-Hughes for being Eurocentric because it defends equality and freedom, which he believes are Western values. While this argument is mistaken, his criticism does have some merit since many anthropologists with a moral orientation do universalize Western values. It seems that both positions are Eurocentric in their confusion of Western values and universal values. In this regard, African American anthropologist Marimba Ani* (1994) has pointed out that the professed values of the West are rhetorical and do not reflect behavior patterns of Western culture, and that this rhetorical ethic reflects how the West wants to be seen in order to disguise cultural imperialism. Responses to the debate between D’Andrade and Scheper-Hughes indicate that there is a growing number of anthropologists who are personally engaged and politically committed, but also that there is still a hegemonic faith in ‘objectivity’ and ‘rationality’. British social anthropology seems to be more conservative and positivistic, while feminist and postcolonial perspectives are stronger in American cultural anthropology. While British anthropology has a long tradition of attempting to

* Marimba Ani also changed her original European ‘slave name’, Dona Richards, to an African name as part of her personal affirmation of African identity. (Ani 1994)
model anthropology as a ‘science’, moral responsibility and political commitment have been significant in American anthropology since the antiracist scholarship of Boas and Benedict.

In the only Third World response to the debate, Malaysian Aihwa Ong (1995) points out that the whole debate between rationalist and moralist positions is Eurocentric because it is universalizing Western perspectives without considering if other cultures may have different perspectives on these issues. The debate itself represents an anthropological hegemony where the cultural others on whose behalf anthropologists claim to make objective descriptions or take moral stands, are silenced and ignored. She criticizes D’Andrade for avoiding the issue that all models to evaluate empirical evidence are based on implicit moral criteria and that research is inseparable from power relations. According to Ong, D’Andrade’s position enables him to maintain a superior objectivist Western relation to cultural others, a criticism which D’Andrade arrogantly dismisses as fantasy in his reply. Ong sees Scheper-Hughes’ position as more courageous, but also more complicated. She agrees with Scheper-Hughes that anthropology is ultimately about ethics, a position that corresponds to the Asian conception that there is no truth outside of morality.

However, Ong is uncomfortable with Scheper-Hughes’ political righteousness. She points to the danger of applying Western notions of Christian, individualistic and universalizing morality. A moral position in anthropology risks imposing Western values on other cultures and maintain cultural imperialism in the form of paternalism which reinforces the structure of dominance. Ong reminds us that although a female anthropologist is in a special position to help women; such actions also reinforce her personal power as a white woman as well as the power structure she seeks to subvert. As a solution, she suggests that we can no longer afford a simple cultural relativism accompanied by apolitical detachment. Instead, we need to acknowledge other cultures on their own terms, outside of Western domination. According to Ong, anthropology needs to develop sensitivity to cultural difference, and a relational ethics to other societies guided by a ‘weak’ human universal of emancipation.
The critical study of racism

Teun van Dijk (1993) is one prominent example of a white scholar who critically studies racism, and he emphasizes that this requires an acknowledgement of the perspectives of “conscious” members of ‘minority’ groups who experience racism as such. This perspective leads to an experience-based definition of racism, where acts of discrimination are evaluated as such by their consequences for ‘minorities’. (Essed 1991) This definition of racism is more inclusive than the one generally accepted by white scholars and institutions, who tend to limit their definition of racism to intentionally harmful attitudes or actions. Van Dijk writes that white scholars tend to ignore ‘minority’ perspectives, and if not, “they see minority evaluations of white practices as being biased and self-serving, if not oversensitive, vindictive, or even as examples of reverse racism.” (1993:19) This tendency to discredit minority perspectives he identifies as academic racism, especially where white scholars “deny or mitigate racism, and assume that they themselves are in a better position to determine or define what racism is.” (ibid.) The fact that critical studies of racism are still controversial in anthropology derives in part from this epistemological Eurocentrism, which prevents the full acknowledgement of Third World and Black perspectives. The recognition of Black analysts of white racism in anthropology is a starting point for unlearning Eurocentrism, decolonizing anthropological knowledge and making it truly comparative. Marginalized groups must be studied within the context of colonial history, neo-colonial relations, and power structures (Gullestad 2004), and these studies demand an explicit problematization of dominant groups.

Critical scholars and activists since Marx have pointed out that groups positioned at the bottom of social and economic hierarchies potentially have certain critical insights into the system as a whole, as well as an awareness of the need to resist. From the standpoint of white racial privilege, the system of racism is largely invisible. (Frankenberg 1994) We may thus learn something about our own culture from the experiences of Blacks, the perspectives of Rasta and the critical theories of Black scholars. They can inform us that contrary to the claims of liberal theory, white racism and Western imperialism continue to oppress and exploit Black people worldwide, on both
material and cultural levels. Most theoretical approaches have been either too materialistic or too culturalistic. (Kearney 1996) A study of cultural imperialism must necessarily take both aspects seriously. In this thesis, I attempt to study the cultural aspects of imperialism and domination without reducing them to epiphenomena of a determining material base, or losing sight of the military, political and economic aspects. Taking the Rasta perspective as a starting point, I will analyze cultural and personal forms of imperialism. In agreement with the Rasta view, Ani (1994) has argued that since non-Western cultures tend to be spiritually oriented, cultural, ideological and psychological violence is at least as damaging to their humanity as is physical violence. Black critical theories emphasize that contrary to the claims of economistic Marxism, the essence of life is psychological in addition to material. They point us to the important fact that power may be acquired materially, but is maintained psychologically. Psychological studies of domination inform us that the relationship between oppressor and oppressed generates mental illness in both groups. (Gilroy 1993) Fanon (1967) has conceptualized the psychological aspect of racial domination in terms of inferiority and superiority complexes, while maintaining that they have a material basis.

In the US, an interdisciplinary field of Whiteness Studies has recently emerged as a result of the growing acknowledgement of the significance of the social positioning of researchers, as well as of anti-racist political activism. (Doane 2003) This explicitly anti-racist critical paradigm reverses the traditional focus on the problems of ‘minorities’ and instead problematizes the ‘white majority’ (Frankenberg 1993). A central insight of this critical paradigm is the concept of ‘white privilege’ – “the unearned benefits that flow to whites in the American racial order” (Doane 2003:6-7) – privileges of which whites are largely “unconscious” due to a low degree of awareness of racial identity among white Americans. The critical study of whiteness in America is a further development of Black Studies programs that were started in the 1960s, which have their origin in an African American intellectual tradition that can be traced to the writings of Du Bois in the early 20th century. The origin of Whiteness Studies in the African American tradition reflects the invisibility of whiteness to white scholars (Doane 2003), and serves as an illustration of what we may learn about “white” culture from Black perspectives.
Structure of thesis

In chapter 2, I will give an introductory presentation of the Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum, including some background information about the organization which runs the websites. I will discuss the purpose and guidelines of the forum, and present some statistics of the participants in discussion. The core members will be presented with their pictures and some personal data, and I will clarify technical positions on the forum such as administrator and moderator. Finally, I will shortly discuss some underlying reasons for the distribution of members according to race, gender and location. Chapter 3 will present the symbolic dimension of the Rastafari movement. Here, I will discuss the specific Rasta language, Dread Talk, as well as some significant symbolic concepts, such as Babylon, Ethiopia and Haile Selassie. These symbols will be analyzed in terms of Rastafari’s symbolic and ideological resistance against the hegemonic Eurocentric world view, and the extent to which Rastafari has effectively delegitimized the hegemonic ideology and reaffirmed African identity as a means of symbolic empowerment. Finally, I will discuss the limitations to symbolic struggle, in relation to the appropriation of Rasta symbolism by political and commercial interests as well as by white subcultures. On this forum, the Rastas place greater emphasis on the underlying ‘substance’ rather than on the symbols itself, and have in many instances moved away from symbolic language towards social scientific concepts.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of reasoning as the Rastafari way of constructing knowledge. Here, I include a discussion of how reasoning proceeds on the internet, and how racial identities are established and negotiated. Rastafari reasoning follows an epistemology which emphasizes the connections between experience, knowledge and action, and the participants’ truth claims are consistently evaluated on the basis of their personal experience and position in the social structure. Further, speech acts are analyzed along with people’s conduct in the reasoning in order to evaluate and discern a person’s character and integrity. Far from being a simple exchange of different viewpoints, the purpose of reasoning is personal development, and participants are constantly challenged to re-evaluate their conduct as a means to gain greater awareness of
unintended and unconscious forms of racism, and encouraged to translate their increased awareness into behavior change. In chapter 5, I discuss the structural level of white supremacy on the basis of personal accounts of experiences of racism, colorism and Eurocentrism. Several Black women tell stories about how they have tried to escape racism by changing their looks towards a Eurocentric ideal of beauty, and how the Reasoning Forum has helped them to appreciate their African features.

In chapter 6, I move on to an analysis of the Black liberation movement dimension of Rastafari in terms of social movement theory. Similar to a number of other ‘new’ social movements, autonomy is a central aspect of their struggle. Autonomy is significant on three levels. First, a central goal of the movement is Black political autonomy in terms of self-determination. Here, I will contrast the ideological positions of Black Nationalism and white liberalism, which frequently clash on the forum, and clarify the Rasta position towards whites and on racial essentialism. Related to political autonomy is autonomy of struggle, referring to the insistence that Black social movements may comfortably enter coalitions and alliances with other social justice projects only as long as the Black struggle is not subordinated to other goals. This is best ensured by preserving leadership in Black movements for Blacks who have both personal experience with, and general knowledge of racism. It is pointed out that those who lack personal experiences of oppression often do not understand its nuances and subtleties, and generally do not address these issues in ways that promote the lowest levels in the racial hierarchy. The third aspect of autonomy is the personal dimension, which requires people to move beyond ideological rhetoric and integrate their political convictions into personal behavior, in order to develop a strong character and a high level of moral integrity.

This personal focus leads us to the central issue of chapter 7, which is an analysis of micro-level forms of racism in everyday interaction between individuals. This discussion takes as a starting point characteristic arguments and speech acts of well-meaning white participants on the forum, which are perceived as offensive by Black participants. The forms of everyday racism encountered on the forum have been identified and systematized in other studies, and include
denial of racism and perceptions of “reverse racism” caused by most whites’ lack of awareness of racism as a structure of dominance. Dominance in personal interaction is another form of everyday racism, which includes attempts to redefine Black experience, denigrate Black perspectives and impose ‘white’ agendas, definitions and viewpoints. Paternalism, that is, white attempts to help Blacks by telling them what is best for them, is also identified as a form of everyday racism. What all these issues have in common is an underlying assumption of “white superiority” resulting from internalized Eurocentric ideology. Chapter 8 analyzes a number of instances where white participants gradually learn about Black experiences, perspectives and sensibilities, and what kind of behavior is perceived as offensive and disrespecting. These whites then struggle to “unlearn white superiority” and translate their awareness into behavior change. Since we speak of changing unconscious assumptions and habitual behavior, in short, internalized and taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting, this requires a form of gradual re-socialization towards an anti-racist white identity. Chapter 9 will conclude the thesis by discussing what lessons we may learn from the standpoint of the most oppressed. Many of our common sense ideas about Western culture turn out to be illusions of the privileged that cannot survive a confrontation with the experiences of the oppressed. The reality of white racism, imperialism and capitalist exploitation of the Third World requires us to re-evaluate the moral status of our celebrated “Western civilization.” A first step towards developing moral responsibility for the condition of humanity is the full acknowledgement of the perspectives of the most oppressed. This is a responsibility that falls heavily on the discipline of anthropology, which should be at the frontline in the academic struggle against Eurocentrism and Western global dominance.
CHAPTER 2

The Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum

*I understand Europe, our greatest problem, only when I see where I as a European do not fit into the world.*

Carl Jung (1963:232)

The Africa Speaks website is part of a network of interlinked websites, which was started on Trinicenter.com in 2001. The Self Empowerment Learning Fraternity (SELF), a Black-owned non-profit organization based on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, runs these websites. This organization seeks to promote Black empowerment by fostering self-awareness and personal growth, with the ultimate aim of making a contribution to solving the great problems of the world through ordinary people taking responsibility for themselves. In addition to running these websites, SELF also provides lectures, discussions, TV and radio programs, private counseling and self-development workshops. The websites now operate under three domain names; AfricaSpeaks.com, RastaSpeaks.com and RastafariSpeaks.com, with an intention to keep three main areas of discussion, an African focus, a spiritual focus, and a Rastafari focus. The Africa Speaks websites were created by Ras Forever, Ayinde and Aisha, all residents of Trinidad. Ras Forever has passed away, while Aisha and Ayinde are still part of the management team. Aisha is the chief administrator of the websites, while Ayinde is the most experienced member, thus often appearing as spokesman for the community.

**My fieldwork on the Reasoning Forum**

My field study has concentrated on the Reasoning Forum, which is only a small part of the Africa Speaks website, and only one of several discussion forums. I have also collected information
from other message boards and discussion forums, as well as from a great number of articles posted on the network of websites. The fieldwork consisted of following and participating in the discussions of this forum over a total period of about 15 months, beginning in April 2003 and continuing until July 2004. The first five-month period can be characterized as a preliminary fieldwork of occasional observation, with the purpose of making a decision as to whether I could find relevant and sufficient data for my project. The three-month period from September to December 2003 was a period of higher intensity, with an attempt to full participant observation.

I soon learned that participating in a Black self-empowerment discussion forum as a white anthropologist raises some challenges. How could I justify my presence there in the first place? If there is one thing these people are fed up with, it is allegedly well-meaning white people wanting to “help” them or “study” them. I had already during my preliminary observations noticed that race issues are discussed frankly and openly here, but I was still unsure where to fit in myself. About half of the participants in the discussions are white people, most of them ‘white Rastas’ with varying understanding of the Black struggle. Many of these whites seemed to come to these boards to promote their own version of Rastafari, which resembles a hippie ideology of “peace and love,” marijuana and reggae music, while trying to avoid issues of oppression and racism that Black members face in their everyday lives. The resulting confrontations often became quite heated, and it could initially appear that white people in general were not welcome on these forums. After a while I found out that there was a legitimate role for white persons in the discussions, and that the first requirement was to honestly and personally participate in the discussions on racial oppression and privilege. I tried to engage the discussions on race, and otherwise found it best to keep a low profile. It seemed more appropriate to “sit down and listen carefully” rather than maximize participation. The written form of interaction made it possible for me to read and reread previous discussions. On several occasions it was pointed out to other white participants, that they rather read what is already available before promoting their own viewpoints. I realized that statements based on personal experience have more credibility here than the presentation of abstract ideas. It was often pointed out that everyone can simply repeat the words, but personally understanding the issues is quite another thing. That posed a new
challenge, since I perceived the discussions to be mainly about Black experience, an experience I
did not share and had no true knowledge of. I still wasn’t conscious about my own “experience of
racism,” that is, the significance of being white for my own personal experience. This led me to
an investigation of “white privilege” – the white experience of racism.

The Africa Speaks community

In this section I would like to give a presentation of the core members of the Africa Speaks
community. The people behind these websites include many more than I encountered on the
Reasoning Forum. As SELF is Black-owned and Black-oriented, all administrators are Blacks,
and to my knowledge all located in Trinidad. The technical work of the administrators is mostly
behind the scenes, and only a few of them regularly participate in the public discussions on the
Reasoning Forum. As this is a non-profit organization, administrators are employed elsewhere,
and this requires a large number of persons to be involved in management. Another technical
group is the moderators, who have a more public role on the discussion forum. It is their task to
moderate the various message boards, to enforce rules of proper conduct, and they have access to
move or delete others’ posts. Some administrators are simultaneously moderators. Moderators are
appointed by management on the basis of trust, and do not need to be geographically located in
Trinidad. During my period of fieldwork, moderators have frequently changed, as some of them
have left the forum for various reasons, and new members have joined. There are currently only
Black moderators on the Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum, while two white American women
moderate an affiliated forum on European roots.

Administrators and moderators form the core of the online community. In addition, there are a
number of long-term contributors that are regular participants in the discussions. These include
persons of all shades of skin color, from all continents of the world, too many to be introduced
individually here. There is also a large number of casual participants. Some of these pass through
the forum posting only once or twice. Finally, there is an even larger group of people who are
only observers to the discussions, and have not posted themselves. Some of these have registered
a username with optional data on gender, age and location, while others have not. The last category of people leaves no information whatsoever, whereas some of the registered inactive members have left some information about their identity. I will give a personal presentation of core members first, and then present some statistics of gender, location and skin color and corresponding activity levels. I also include a cautionary estimate of the less active groups.

**Administrators and moderators**

In this section, I will present the original founders of the online community, administrators who have been active in the discussions, some current and past moderators, and a few other central members. These people are presented with picture and personal information below.

**Ras Forever** was a Black Trinidadian Rastaman, who created the original message board with Aisha and Ayinde in 2001. He joined SELF when they had a radio talk show, and encouraged them to expand on the Internet. Ras Forever passed away on December 23, 2002.

**Aisha** is a Black Trinidadian woman. She and Ayinde designed all fourteen interlinked websites. She is now chief administrator and leads the management team. She works mostly behind the scenes, and her active participation in the discussions has thus been limited.

**Ayinde** is a Black Trinidadian man. He was originally asked to join SELF by Ras Forever and other Rasta Elders. As the most experienced member today, he acts as community spokesman and explains important issues. He also writes articles and offers advice.

**Tyehimba** is a brown-skinned Trinidadian Rastaman. He has been involved with the websites since the beginning, and is currently administrator and moderator. He is chief consultant on Dreadlocks Rasta related matters. Tyehimba also writes articles.
Ayanna is a 24 years old Black Trinidadian woman. She recently joined the community, and is now part of management. She is a UWI student of literature with a particular interest in feminist and African perspectives. She also publishes articles on the websites.

Leslie is a Black woman from Trinidad, who joined the Reasoning Forum recently. She is currently one of the administrators and moderators of the forum.

Kelani is a 32 years old Black Congolese woman. She lives in Dallas, Texas, after having spent ten years in France and other European countries. She recently joined the forum, and is now moderating her own forum in French. She adds a continental African perspective to the reasonings.

Rootsie is a 47 years old white American woman of Spanish descent, who lives in Vermont. She has been involved with Rasta since the seventies. She moderates an affiliated discussion forum on European roots. Offline, she is a high school teacher. She writes articles for the websites.

Tracey is a white American woman who lives in New Jersey. She is co-moderator on Rootsie’s Forum on European roots. Offline, she works as a massage therapist. She also writes articles for the websites.

Mandingo is a 30 years old near-white Brazilian man of Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic ancestry, who lives in Recife. He works as a teacher and has a special interest in African culture, lifestyle issues and personal development. He has also translated some Rasta books into Portuguese.

Kristine is a white American woman whose husband for ten years is a Black Rasta. She comes from Colorado, USA. She is a long term member but holds no technical position on the forum.

Oshun Auset is a light-skinned, mixed-race American woman who lives in the southern USA, the daughter of a white woman and an African American man. She is a Pan-African political activist and a member of the All African Peoples’ Revolutionary Party (AAPRP).
Other participants

The people presented above are mostly administrators and moderators and form the core of this online community. There are several hundred other persons who participate in the discussions regularly or occasionally. I will give some rough estimates on their statistical distribution according to gender, ‘race’, and continent of origin. These statistics should be read as rough estimates rather than exact numbers. Since providing background information is optional, there are some difficulties in establishing member’s origins and skin color, especially for less frequent and casual participants. I have defined a regular poster as someone with at least thirty posts, usually over a minimum period of a few months. Regular posters can usually be identified with some precision, and their statistical distribution is shown in table 1. Moderators and administrators are included in the following statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regular posters</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blacks total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean (1)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American (2)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African (3)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European (4)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Whites total</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American (5)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others total</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (6)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American (7)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (8)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Distribution of regular posters on gender, race, and continent of origin

(1) Including Guyana
(2) African Americans of all shades inclusive of mixed and light-skinned persons
(3) Including African-born persons who live in America or Europe
(4) Persons of African origin born in Europe
(5) Including Canada
(6) Persons from Latin America, including those who live in North America
(7) Native Americans, including mixed race
(8) Specifically Indians and Arabs, including those who live in Europe or America

All numbers given in percentages.

In the next category of active members, I have included registered members who have participated at least once in the discussions, based on the information they have given about themselves. This category also includes administrators, moderators and regular posters. The
following table 2 should be read with this in mind. Nevertheless, it does give some indication of the distribution of all discussion participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active members</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blacks total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean (1)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American (2)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African (3)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European (4)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American (5)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (6)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American (7)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (8)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Distribution of active members on gender, race, and continent of origin**

(1) Including Guyana
(2) African Americans of all shades inclusive of mixed and light-skinned persons
(3) Including African-born persons who live in America or Europe
(4) Persons of African origin born in Europe
(5) Including Canada
(6) Persons from Latin America, including those who live in North America
(7) Native Americans, including mixed race
(8) Specifically Indians and Arabs, including those who live in Europe or America

All numbers given in percentages.

An interesting observation drawn from these statistics is that there are about as many white persons as Black persons participating in the discussions. Considering that this website is explicitly constructed by Black people, to discuss Black issues among Blacks, the fact that it attracts so many whites needs some explanation. Rastafari symbolism has long attracted white people, particularly young men. The issue of white people in Rastafari is something that I will return to throughout the thesis. A second observation is that there is almost perfect gender equality on this website, despite traditional male dominance in Rastafari and in the US Black Power movement. The high number of female participants is related to the feminist focus of this site. A notable gender imbalance exists in the “other” category, where there are no women. This category, however, is based on too few persons to be statistically significant. It is thus only among the white regular posters we can find a significant male dominance. This is balanced by the fact that there are no white men among the current moderators, who tend to be active posters.
Observation over time shows that white men hold the highest turnover rate. This indicates that although white men are attracted to Rastafari in great numbers, they do not necessarily find what they are looking for on this site. One reason might be the feminist as well as Black orientation. It might be that white women are more open to the Black perspective than white men, because of a similarity between feminist and Black perspectives. (Ås 1981) A comparison of the perspectives of Rootsie and Tracey with Mandingo’s lends some support to this hypothesis.

Interpreting the continental distribution of members, we need to take several factors into consideration. The main reason for the predominance of the Caribbean and the United States is of course that Rastafari movement is native to this region. Although originally Jamaican, it has spread all over the Caribbean and among Caribbean immigrants in North America. The challenges of oppression and racism that Black people face in these two regions facilitate identification with the Rastafari perspective. African Americans and Black Caribbeans roughly share the same history of slavery, poverty and marginalization, although there are significant differences. Reggae music has brought the message of Rastafari across the globe, and is a major reason for white people’s fascination with Rastafari in Australia, Europe and North America. Another factor is language. English is the preferred language on the Reasoning Forum, thereby virtually excluding Latin American regions where Blacks face similar challenges as in the English-speaking parts of the Americas. Most whites on the forum are from English-speaking countries; the US, Canada, England and Australia.

**The digital divide**

An important factor explaining continental distribution patterns is the digital divide. Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson (2002) write, “The makeup of online communities rests directly upon the constitution of internet users, i.e. those who have access”. Not only access to the Internet, but also technical knowledge (computer literacy) and time to spend on the internet is correlated to economic conditions. Access to the Internet is generally higher in the West with the US having the highest number of computers per person. This gives an indication to why there are
more participants from the US than from the Caribbean where Rasta originated. On the other hand, US economic inequality is extreme, and African Americans are over-represented in terms of poverty. This helps explain the number of white Americans compared to African Americans. Although the Caribbean countries are poor compared to the US, the region in general is more technologically developed than some parts of Latin America, and Internet access is more widespread than in Africa. Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2001) report that in Trinidad surprisingly many people have regular access to the Internet, even in the lower classes of society.

The digital divide is an issue that the moderators of the forum are painfully aware of. Tyehimba comments on the American and white dominance on the forum,

The digital divide is something that we often take for granted. It is no accident that most people on this board are from the US. … Most of the people who have access to the Internet and post on the message board are middle class lighter-skinned Black people, who are even a minority when compared overall to the number of white people accessing the forum.

Ayinde comments on why the digital divide is a problem for Black empowerment,

Many who are most affected by the system cannot even afford computers and the views of most light-skinned mixed race people only speak of Blackness in a symbolic way. … Often the spokespeople for Black issues are not people who have experienced racism from the ‘lowest’ level of the spectrum so their rhetoric usually rings hollow to many informed dark-skinned Blacks.

The observations by Tyehimba and Ayinde correspond to my own statistics. Excluding administrators and moderators, the statistics show a majority of white Americans. Observation of the discussions supports Ayinde’s statement that many people who identify as Blacks do not speak from a dark-skinned Black experience. Many Black posters admit to be able to pass for white, allowing them to escape the worst effects of racism. Many Americans identify themselves as students, indicating that they do not belong to the poorest class of society.

Choosing dark-skinned, preferably female Blacks as administrators and moderators is a deliberate policy on the forum. The explicit aim is Black empowerment, and one aspect of this is to provide access to and give a voice to those people who are both the most oppressed and the most ignored
in a racist and sexist social structure. In order to “tell the hidden half” of the story and “restore the balance” of perspectives, dark-skinned Black voices are supported and promoted. A central goal of these websites is to make alternative information and perspectives available. Since the mainstream media more or less consistently represents a Eurocentric and negative image of Africa and Black culture, presenting positive information about Africa as well as critical Black perspectives is an important means of resisting the hegemonic portrayal of Africa. Alternative Black media such as this site may thus help Blacks to appreciate the African aspects of their identity and form a healthier self-image. Further, the website also makes alternative information available to white people who may often have a distorted view of Africa and Black culture due to Eurocentric misrepresentation in the mainstream media and through the education system. Beyond Africa, these websites also include articles on, and links to, a range of critical information about Western imperialism around the world, and thus link up with other social justice projects around the world. It is thus recognized that the Black struggle is one aspect of a global struggle for social justice and the right to self-determination.

**Purpose and focus of the discussion forum**

In the introduction to the discussion forum it is stated,

[We] welcome those who wish to reason on the various aspects of Rastafarian livity. We see this and all other manifestations of African culture in the Diaspora, as part of our core African theme and focus. Our interest is not merely the debates among the many interpretations of Rastafari, but the general development of people.

Anyone is invited to “post related information, comment on articles, news, and issues of general interest that are in keeping with [the] stated focus.” However, posters who “just clutter this board will be asked to use other boards.” New users are asked to “participate in existing discussions before starting new topics,” and to “try to get an idea of the Site and discussions first.” The discussion forum has a clear focus and relatively detailed guidelines in order to keep this focus. This distinguishes it from certain chat rooms, which sometimes do not have topical limitations other than to adhere to common standards of decency. Another difference between discussion
forums and chat rooms is that chat room conversation happens in “real time,” whereas in discussion forums such as this one, users post messages in reply to other messages that may have been posted long time before. Threads of posts usually stay open for several months, before they are removed to the open or closed archive. A typical chat room may feature more spontaneous and casual conversation, while a discussion forum also welcomes longer articles. On the other hand, the discussion forum is similar to a chat room in that management lets the forums be user-driven, and only occasionally introduce topics. The forums are moderated, and messages found to violate common standards of decency are removed. These standards include a ban on commercial advertising, personal insults, and generally offensive material such as pornography.

Discussion threads are organized according to topical categories. The following list gives an indication of the range of topics on the Africa Speaks Reasoning Forum.

- A general section with guidelines, general reasonings and an under-18 section
- An open archive for illuminating reasonings on race, racism, history and Rastafari
- A section with news and views on Africa and world
- Sections with pictures celebrating Africa, and on human origins and migrations
- A section for poetry, quotes, book reviews, arts and music
- Sections on science and technology, health and lifestyle, relationships and gender
- A section on spirituality and mainstream religion
- A section for technical help, questions and suggestions about the forums

I have paid special attention to those discussions relevant for the analysis of racism and Rastafari resistance against it.

**Privacy policy on the forum**

It is necessary to create a username, register an email address and receive a password in order to be able to post on the forum. Privacy policy states, “It is up to users to conceal or reveal their own identities.” Management “respects the right of posters to conceal personal details.” All information, which may identify a user in her offline world, is given voluntarily. However, many reasonings are based on real-life experiences, and users often provide a wide range of personal
information. In no case is it necessary to provide full names, addresses or work-place information, and this grants users a certain level of anonymity. On the other hand, anonymity should not be overestimated. It is probably quite possible to identify some participants in real life on the basis of written personal information they have provided on this forum, even for people who have not submitted their pictures.

Wilson and Peterson (2002) write, “For some researchers, the statements made in publicly accessible discussion boards […] are in the public domain and may thus be freely used by researchers.” The Africa Speaks website is a publicly accessible discussion forum, and the forum’s own guidelines state that any information posted in the discussions is regarded as public. Consequently, it should not be necessary to protect the identity of informants by changing user names or altering personal details. The guidelines specifically state that when reproducing articles or comments from the websites and forums in part or in full, one must credit the writers. Wilson and Peterson (ibid.), consistent with their view that “anthropology online is substantially the same as any other sort of anthropological research,” argue that the “ethical principles of showing respect for people under study, of protecting their dignity and best interests, of protecting anonymity or giving proper credit, and of obtaining informed consent, apply online as well as in face-to-face contexts.” In light of this, I generally present posters by their stated user names, including personal details they have provided. The terms of service state that,

Any information that is disclosed on a message board becomes public information. You should exercise caution when deciding to disclose your personal information. To control abuse, IP addresses are recorded when posting on these message boards and forums. After any posting, your IP address is also available to the administrators of the message boards and forums.

An IP address is a registration number similar to a telephone number, which identifies where a user’s computer is connected to the Internet. It can identify which computer a message was posted from through the user’s Internet provider, and helps administrators trace users’ geographical location. We may assume that many contributors access the Internet from public computers at Internet cafés, libraries, universities and work places. Many users may use a different computer each time, and several users may access the forum from the same computer,
so that IP addresses cannot generally identify the person behind the screen unless a person is using her own internet subscription. Terms of use also make clear that a separate account is required for each user, which means that sharing registered accounts is not allowed. Users who register various usernames in an attempt to monopolize the boards, will have their accounts and posts deleted. What is the purpose of these rather strict rules and guidelines? This and other questions concerning reasoning on an internet forum, will be addressed in chapter 4. First, however, I will introduce and discuss the symbolic dimension of Rastafari.
In this chapter, we will analyze Rastafari symbolism and its significance for the development of an alternative consciousness and identity in opposition to Eurocentric hegemony. Like other Black movements, Rastas use symbolic resistance in their struggle for social change, and argue that psychological liberation is necessary before political liberation is possible. (Hutton and Murrell 1998) The Rastafari project of resistance and liberation on the symbolic level is twofold. It consists of a rejection and delegitimation of the Eurocentric understanding of Black people and their cultures, as well as of the creation of an alternative culture that reflects and affirms their Black African heritage. (Edmonds 1998a) Like other Afrocentric ideologies, such as Garveyism, Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism, Rastafari promotes a positive understanding of African culture and tradition. This ‘idealization’ of Africa is rooted in African continuities in the Diaspora as well as in the Black experience of racial oppression. Africa thus serves as a symbol for Black identity. (Hutton and Murrell 1998)

Gilroy (1987) writes that the symbolic construction of a Black community is a part of the collective action of Black social movements. Since Black experiences, perspectives and cultures are highly differentiated, the symbols of Blackness are flexible vehicles for a variety of contradictory meanings which may be held by the adherents of the movements. The use of common symbols does not necessarily imply that the meanings attached to these symbols are shared by all. The Black community is thus as much about difference as about similarity and identity. The idea of community is relationally constructed through antagonism to other
communities. Its boundary is represented primarily by symbolic means with a broad range of co-existing meanings reconciling individuality and commonality and competing definitions of what the movement is about. Blackness stands as a symbol for this community, enabling people to act socially and cohesively without formal organizational structures. Collective identities expressed through ‘race’ are powerful means to co-ordinate action and create solidarity. The constructed ‘traditional’ culture becomes a means to articulate personal autonomy and collective empowerment focused by symbols with multiple meanings.

Rastafari uses a wide range of symbols, which all have deeper underlying meanings. These symbols include the African colors green, yellow and red as in the Ethiopian flag, the ‘natural’ hairstyle known as “dreadlocks,” images of lions, ritual smoking of ganja (marijuana), as well as the symbolism surrounding Haile Selassie I, emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. Reggae music is another powerful symbolic expression of Rastafari, which articulates the experiences of oppressed Blacks and conveys the spiritual and socio-political message of Rastafari. Rastafari symbolism, and especially reggae music, has attracted an interest in the movement far beyond Diaspora Blacks. While most of these symbols are frequently discussed on the Reasoning Forum, the Rastas of the SELF community emphasize the underlying ‘substance’ rather than the symbols. This is related to the widespread appropriation of Rastafari symbolism by people who do not share the experiences, perspectives and sensibilities of Black Rastas. In this chapter, I will pay specific attention to the Rasta language known as Dread Talk. This is because language is an important medium for communicating cultural meanings, and discourse is an important arena of struggle. I will also discuss the background and meanings of the symbolism of Babylon, Ethiopia and Haile Selassie in terms of the ideological delegitimation of European hegemony and reaffirmation of Africa.

**Dread Talk**

Dread Talk can be characterized as a postcolonial language, and represents an attempt to re-Africanize the English language that Africans in the Diaspora were forced to adopt. Velma
Pollard (1994), a scholar on Dread Talk, points out that Rasta language reflects the speakers’ resistance to oppression as well as their spiritual redemption. She argues that in the case of Dread Talk, “patterns of speech really do reflect patterns of thought.” (ibid. p. xiii) Postcolonial literature theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins and Helen Tiffin describe the Rastas’ deconstruction of the English language in the following way,

The Rastafarians attempt to “deconstruct” what they see as the power structures of English grammar, structures in themselves metonymic of the hegemonic controls exercised by the British on Black peoples throughout the Caribbean and African history – controls no less present today, though they may take different form. (1989:47)

Jamaican patois, a form of creolized English with African-derived grammar and vocabulary, forms the basis of Dread Talk. The Rasta language is the result of conscious and deliberate deconstruction and reconstruction of the English language. While deconstruction is generally associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, it may have been practiced in the Black Diaspora since the times of slavery.

In the following section, I present a sample of Dread Talk vocabulary that is used on the Reasoning Forum. These lists are not meant to be complete; they merely give an indication of the main features of Rasta language, as well as helping the reader understand quotes from the Reasoning Forum. As Pollard (ibid.) reports from Jamaica, Dread Talk is neither spoken by every Rasta nor is it spoken all the time. On the Reasoning Forum, there are also wide variations in the use of Dread Talk, and it does not seem to be an indication of who is a Rasta or not. Rather, it may indicate what kind of Rasta a person is. The more intellectually inclined Black Rastas of the SELF community do not seem to use it as much as do Black Rastas from other places. ‘White Rastas’ who may not be aware of all the underlying meanings, often use symbolism as a way to show that they are Rasta. I will now present a sample of words commonly used in the discussions. Following the classification developed by Pollard, I distinguish between three categories of Dread Talk vocabulary; I-words, deconstructed words, and specific Rasta terminology.
I-words

I-words are the most important category of Dread Talk words, and their use is most widespread. (Pollard 1994) These words represent a manifestation of self-empowerment, on the socio-political as well as the spiritual level. Ashcroft et al. state that for the Rastas,

> both “me” and “we” as objects of the sentence are always dominated or “governed” by the subject, in the way in which white Europeans governed the slaves. On the purely verbal level too, “me” conjures the subservient attitude into which Blacks were forced for their survival under the plantation system. Consequently, the Rastas insist on the use of “I” for the personal pronoun in all positions. (1989:48)

In Jamaican patois, *me* is used for the personal pronoun *I*, in both subject and object positions, indicating that Blacks conceive of themselves as objects, reflecting the racist objectification of enslaved and oppressed Blacks. (Edmonds 1998a) Rastas reverse this and use *I* as a substitute not only for the singular forms *me* and *my*, but also for the plural forms *we*, *us* and *our*, which are replaced by the term *I and I*. Further, the second person pronoun *you* is often substituted by *the I*, which serves as a respectful form of address. On the level of political and personal empowerment, the concept of *I and I* reflects that Rastas perceive themselves as active subjects rather than passive objects. (ibid.) See table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard English</th>
<th>Dread Talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I, me, my</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I and I (also spelt I’n’I, InI, I&amp;I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We, us, our</td>
<td>I and I (also spelt I’n’I, InI, I&amp;I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>The I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: I-words

“I” replaces other personal pronouns as a manifestation of political and spiritual self-empowerment

On the spiritual level, *I and I* is a reflection of the Rasta consciousness which holds that the principle of divinity inheres in each individual. (Edmonds 1998b) The concept of *I and I* is thus also used in the ‘singular’, referring to the unity of the speakers’ ego and spiritual Self. According to Rasta sociologist Dennis Forsythe, I-words manifest “the first-person reality of
conscious Self” (1999:94). *I and I* thus literally means “I and my God”, reflecting a similar spiritual orientation as the Buddhist greeting *namaste*, meaning “I greet the God in you.” Like Buddhists and other practitioners of spirituality, Rastas search for the spirit of God within rather than outside of themselves. For Rastas, spiritual development leads towards a recognition of and unification with, the higher Self within and thus become one with God. When a Rasta uses the term *I and I*, this reflects that she speaks from a united “ego” and “higher self;” thus the plural form *I and I*.

The concept of *I and I* is central for any understanding of Rasta, as it is a reflection of perhaps the most fundamental philosophical concept of the movement. Recognizing the divine spirit within themselves, Rastas have no need for teachers or priests to tell them what is right. This knowledge of the spiritual self informs a Rasta epistemology where self-knowledge is the basis for all knowledge and where truth is equally accessible to all. Rastas derive knowledge of the truth as well as moral guidance from the God within. (Edmonds 1998b) The development of spiritual consciousness is thus basically the process of getting in touch with one’s “inner self” through meditation, sometimes accompanied by chanting, drumming and the smoking of *ganja*, whose psychoactive effect is believed by many Rastas to be helpful for meditation. (Forsythe 1999) Significantly, most of the Rastas of the SELF community hold that in the long run, the negative side effects of *ganja* far outweigh its benefits in terms of conscious development. Table 2 below shows a sample of a second group of I-words, where *I* replaces the first syllable of a Standard English word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard English</th>
<th>Dread Talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>I-tegrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rastaman</td>
<td>I-man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternal</td>
<td>Iternal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever</td>
<td>Iver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites, Heights</td>
<td>Ites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>I-manity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brethren</td>
<td>Idren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly</td>
<td>Issembly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: I-words**

“*I*” replaces the first syllable of potentially any Standard English word, reflecting the self-empowered orientation of the speaker
Deconstructed words

The category of deconstructed words is similar to the second category of I-words above, also in this category are certain syllables substituted. In this group of words, one syllable is replaced by another, which is supposed to reflect more accurately the true meaning of the word. This practice appears as a sort of punning or word play, which is designed to take confusion and double meanings out of the English language, according to Rastas. Table 3 gives some examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard English</th>
<th>Dread Talk</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>Overstand</td>
<td>To grasp an idea, one must stand over it, not under it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppression</td>
<td>Downpression</td>
<td>To be oppressed is to be pressed down, not pressed up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicate</td>
<td>Livicate</td>
<td>Negative dead (ded-) replaced by positive live (liv-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciate</td>
<td>Apprecilove</td>
<td>Negative hate (-ate) replaced by positive love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realize</td>
<td>Realeyes</td>
<td>Realizing something, one sees it with real eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Re-lie-gion</td>
<td>Religion based on lies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Politricks</td>
<td>Politics based on trickery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation</td>
<td>CON-gregation</td>
<td>False congregations led by “con men” (tricksters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception</td>
<td>CON-ception</td>
<td>False conceptions held by “con men” (tricksters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Wombmen</td>
<td>Refers to the womb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>His-story</td>
<td>The white man’s version of history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herstory</td>
<td>Women’s version of history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ourstory</td>
<td>Our (Black people’s) version of history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Realstory</td>
<td>The real (true) version of history</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Deconstructed words

A specific form of Rastafarian punning, where Standard English words are deconstructed and then reconstructed by substituting one syllable, which is meant to reflect more accurately the true meaning of the word.

Symbolic concepts beyond language

The collective identity of Rastafari is supported by powerful symbols representing the oppressed but rising self against the oppressive other. The common sense of evil is expressed through the symbol of Babylon, representing their oppressors. The Rastas’ common sense of identity and
solidarity, arising from their common African past, the Black experience of racial oppression, and their struggle for liberation, is expressed by the symbols of Ethiopia and Africa. (Edmonds 1998b)

_Babylon_

Babylon belongs to a category of Dread Talk vocabulary consisting of words that have taken on new meanings and are used metaphorically. The most important of these are biblical terms that serve as metaphors for the situation Rastas find themselves in. The Diaspora condition of Africans in the Americas is represented by the Old Testament story of the abduction and exile of the Jews in Babylon. Babylon also represents the “Great Whore” of the Book of Revelation, the evil empire which will be judged for her evil deeds on judgment day. The characterization of Babylon in Revelation 18, with its greedy merchants, its decadent wealth and corruption (prostitution may be interpreted metaphorically as selling one’s soul for money) are descriptions that may also fit the Western capitalist empire. Rastas see themselves as “God’s people” if not the chosen people, who experience daily suffering under the evil deeds of their abductors, Babylon, which is described in the Bible as having the typical features of capitalist society, and which will be judged for its evil deeds in the final hour. For those who adhere to the Bible, whether Christian or Rastafari, this interpretation invites millennial expectations. In Rasta terminology, the white oppressor is represented by Babylon. This term refers to Western culture and to capitalism in general, to its specific institutions, to the European and American imperial powers and to institutions of the neo-colonial establishment, including the police, church and education system.

Edmonds (1998a) writes that the term Babylon constitutes a symbolic delegitimation of those Western values and institutions that dominate Blacks. It refers to the evil forces, human attitudes and activities that are out of touch with the natural-divine order. Using a Biblical concept with whose negative value European culture is familiar; Rastafari effectively draws attention to the evils of the current order.
Ethiopia often represents the African continent as a whole. There are a number of reasons for this symbolic significance of Ethiopia. It was the only African country never colonized by Europeans, in fact defeating Italian attempts at colonization until Mussolini’s occupation in the 1930s. Emperor Haile Selassie I claimed an unbroken bloodline to the biblical King Solomon. His crowning had a strong symbolic impact on the African Diaspora, and was interpreted by early Rastafarians as fulfillment of Biblical prophecy in Psalm 68, “Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.” (Forsythe 1999) A number of other Bible verses refer to the great power of Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest Christian churches, established already in the first century C.E. Ethiopia also represents a link between sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt, which was originally settled from the South by Africans traveling down the river Nile. (Diop 1974)

Haile Selassie

Much of the literature on Rastafari, as well as many Rastas themselves, represents the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I as a ‘Black Messiah’. However, this interpretation may be a stronger indication of the hegemonic power of the Christian model of religion on both Rastas as well as those who have studied them. As noted earlier, African spiritual practices and beliefs often survived slavery under the guise of Christianity. Haile Selassie may thus be perceived as a Black substitute for the white Jesus of European Christianity, but this says little about the spiritual significance of the symbol. Followers of many religions may recognize Jesus as one spiritual man among many, who serves as an example worthy of following, without accepting his divinity as the son of God or as the savior of mankind. While some Rastas, especially in the early days of the movement, saw Haile Selassie as their savior, many others deny his special divine status. More politically oriented Rastas and analysts have emphasized Haile Selassie as a substitute for the British Royalty, which was the head of official Jamaica. These many interpretations testify to the multiplicity of symbolic meanings pointed out by Gilroy above.
The SELF community conceives of Selassie as a symbolic inspiration rather than as a Messiah, as Ayinde points out in the following,

Selassie was … a symbolic inspiration to many … Christianized Africans whose only source of learning … was the Christian Bible. But not all colonized Africans took the Christian Bible literally, and certainly many did not think Selassie was divine. … Garvey used Selassie to inspire Africans about their own greatness and … never meant that Selassie was the new God for Black Africans. … Selassie was not the defining aspect of Rasta.

We noted above that the term *I and I* refers to the spirit of God within each person, and to a fundamental sense of equality where no one is the object of domination. (Hall 1985) Thus, Rastas need no external savior of the kind Jesus is thought to represent in mainstream Christianity, since everyone is equal and may become like the savior. On the Reasoning Forum, Tyehimba distinguishes this view of spiritual development from the Christian conception of salvation through a Messiah,

Those that want to use the idea of a savior (other than oneself) or repentance as an excuse not to do the work necessary to reconcile with one’s Higher self can do so, but natural law is accorded whether one is knowledgeable about it or not. … There is no shortcut around the hard work of constant character refinement and critical self examination. … In grasping history, reasoning, and examining every word, thought and deed, we can elevate ourselves beyond the prison of our own karmic creation.

While faith in Selassie has often been taken as the defining aspect of Rasta, Stuart Hall (ibid.) and Gilroy (1987) have noted that the divinity of Selassie is less important than the symbolic significance accorded to *Africa*, and that the spiritual orientation of Rasta implies an inner transformation to throw off internalized inferiority. The Rasta conception of spirituality has its roots in West African cosmology, where spiritual forces are present in everyday life. The forces of good and evil are conceptualized as being contained within individual humans and expressed in the ambivalence of everyday life, rather than as separate external entities like heaven and hell. (Austin-Broos 1997) This African view of good and evil as a struggle within persons directs attention to character improvement, as we will see in later chapters.
Babylon, Ethiopia/Africa and Haile Selassie are central symbols and metaphors of significance for Rastafari. Ras Tafari was the title of Haile Selassie I before his coronation in 1930, giving name to the Rastafari movement. A selection of other Rastafarian terms is explained in table 4 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Rasta terminology</strong></th>
<th><strong>Explanation</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Babylon</td>
<td>Biblical metaphor for the Western capitalist empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.I.M. Selassie I</td>
<td>His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I, emperor of Ethiopia 1930-1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zion</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>The African Diaspora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ras Tafari</td>
<td>Prince Tafari, Haile Selassie I before coronation (1930)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rastafari, Rastafarian</td>
<td>Follower of Haile Selassie I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasta, Ras</td>
<td>Seeker of spiritual wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jah</td>
<td>God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livity</td>
<td>Rasta way of life, understood holistically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganja, herb</td>
<td>Marijuana, considered a wisdom weed by many Rastas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyabinghi, Iyabinghi, Binghi</td>
<td>Rasta gathering, a spiritual reasoning session, originally meaning “death to the (Black and) white oppressor”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartical</td>
<td>Relating to the heart, symbolizing spiritual love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locz</td>
<td>Dreadlocks, the natural hairstyle of Africans in the forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vibes</td>
<td>Vibrations, like sound waves or spiritual energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rootical</td>
<td>From the (African) roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burn fire, bun fiyah</td>
<td>Spiritual fire burning out evil (catharsis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen? Seen!</td>
<td>Understand? Agreed!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Rasta terminology**

Specific terms referring to important concepts and terminology in Rastafari symbolism and ideology. Include Biblical metaphors as well as specific Rasta concepts.

**Symbolic resistance**

Eurocentric ideology has long degraded everything African and glorified the European. According to the social theory of Rastafari, this hegemonic ideology has brainwashed many Blacks and convinced them of their inferiority. They refer to this form of ‘false consciousness’ as
‘mental slavery’. Thus, they resist the Eurocentric system of education which dehumanizes them and makes them ashamed of their African identity. (Edmonds 1998a) Paul Willis (1978) refers to symbolic resistance as a means by which the oppressed reject the categories imposed on them by the elite. He elaborates how an oppressed group partially penetrates the dominant ideology, and how symbolic resistance is contained and may reproduce class difference. The British working-class men in his study were aware that their education reproduced their working-class status, and thus resisted schooling, which they saw as an agent of their oppression. Willis makes the point that by rejecting education as such, they deny themselves the cultural capital that would enable them to escape the working-class, and thus, their resistance reproduces the class structure. (Kearney 1996)

Contrary to the rejection of education which allowed resistance to reproduce oppression in Willis’ study (ibid.); Diaspora Blacks have often defended higher learning as a goal in itself and as the foundation for a new educational system. (Gilroy 1993) Although highly critical of the function of higher education as an agency of socialization into a Eurocentric worldview, many Blacks have acquired skills in formal education for community development, empowerment, and for challenging racism. (Collins 2000) Appropriating the knowledge of the oppressor in order to fight against oppression has been a widespread strategy in the history of Black struggle, and is also exemplified by the early Rastas’ use of the Bible, which was the only reading material available to poor Blacks at the time. Today, Rastas on the Reasoning Forum support their arguments with the newest scientific research, such as archeological findings which confirm a common African ancestry of all contemporary humans only 60 000 years ago, as well as other evidence of advanced pre-historical civilizations in Africa. The African origins of pre-historical humanity, the Black African roots of Ancient Egypt, and the Egyptian influences on European culture via classical Greece and Biblical Israel, were central concerns for the African scholar Diop (1974), who sought to disprove Eurocentric claims of African backwardness and lack of civilization.
While members of the working class may “escape” their class position by assimilating into the middle class, Blacks do not have the option of physically becoming white, as those who have attempted to do so are painfully aware of. In the case of Women’s liberation, it has also been pointed out by critical feminists that assimilation reinforces the structure of inequality rather than liberating women. Rather than attempting to become equal with men within a dualist hierarchy, they challenge the ontology of inequality. (Kearney 1996) As we discussed in the introduction, this is also the strategy of Rastafari. Rasta emerged as a rejection of widespread Black attempts to “escape their Black identity” which may have been successful in individual cases, but which were unsuccessful in terms of collectively escaping racism. While taking on a symbolic white identity may allow individual Blacks to partially escape racial oppression, it does not challenge the logic of racism nor change its structure. Furthermore, assimilation is unsatisfactory because it demands people to give up their identity. Instead, Black movements have struggled for their right to difference in equality and equality in difference. (Escobar 2004) Michael Kearney (ibid.) points out that the invocation of traditional culture as symbolic resistance may also reproduce inequality. In colonial Jamaica, the Rastafari movement was largely contained in this way, as the establishment labeled Rastas as uncivilized, criminal and mentally disturbed because of their rejection of the Eurocentric standards of civility which governed the society. (Edmonds 2003) While Rastafari invokes African tradition as symbolic resistance against Eurocentric domination and affirms a positive African identity, their symbolism also marked them out for oppression as long as the dominant powers sought to repress Rasta. (Kearney 1996)

With Jamaican political independence in 1962, Rasta’s symbolic confrontation proved effective for social change. (Chevannes 1998) The national ideology of the Jamaican mixed-race elite promoted ‘creolization’ and valued assimilation and mimicry of European culture, an orientation that did not reflect the experiences of the dark-skinned majority. (Nettleford 1972, 1978) While the lower classes identified more easily with the Afrocentric consciousness of Rastafari, the movement also forced the primarily light-skinned middle-class to begin a process of self-examination. (Chevannes 1998) Rather than ‘converting’ to the Afrocentric consciousness of Rastafari, the cultural polarization between the European and the African pole forced Jamaicans
to take sides, and many realized that they preferred a liberated Black identity over a colonial white one. Positive self-identification with Blackness enables others to value Blackness (Collins 2000), and Rastafari has had a significant cultural influence on the mainstream through reggae music. (Hall 1985) Not only did Rastafari successfully shift the cultural hegemony in Jamaica in the 1970s, but this Black counter-culture of resistance has widely influenced white sub-cultures as well, notably in the US and the UK. (Gilroy 1987)

**Beyond symbolism**

As Rastafari has gained widespread symbolic support, the establishment has changed its strategy from containment to cooptation of Rasta symbols, which have now been appropriated by commercial interests to such an extent that they have lost much of its underlying meaning. (Edmonds 2003) The Rasta image is now marketed to tourists as ‘exotic’ culture. (Kearney 1996) In some Jamaican resorts, tourists are offered to “rent a Rasta” – an abhorrent idea from the perspective of Rastafari philosophy. Recognizing the facile appropriation and containment of its symbolism and the limitations of ideological struggle, Rastas on the Reasoning Forum repeatedly emphasize the importance of ‘substance’ over symbols and focus instead on political organization and alternative education.

On the Reasoning Forum, many ‘white Rastas’ have appropriated the symbols, learned Dread Talk, and quote Bob Marley and Haile Selassie. Benjamin, a Nigerian who lives in England, explains why it is offensive to Blacks when white people appropriate their symbolism,

> The fact that as a young white boy you spot locz [dreadlocks] don’t really alter the fact that you are white, neither does it amount in any way to the racism that black people are at the receiving end of, despite your sincere interest. … Spotting a lock as a white boy is almost tantamount to me as a black man, with broad nose – painting/bleaching myself white, redefining my nose and possibly effecting a white accent. Do you think this in itself will allow me to experience the privilege of been white?

‘White Rastas’ on the Reasoning Forum selectively quote Haile Selassie and Bob Marley and emphasize peace, love and unity, while the struggle against racism and for Black liberation takes on a lesser priority. Rootsie replies to one of them,
‘One Love’ are simply words without substance if ones are not willing to deal with … reality. … To seek to ignore issues of race under the umbrella of Rastafari is simply not possible, and what is more, is most disrespectful to the lived reality to so many of our black sisters and brothers today.

She points out that for a white person coming to Rastafari, the first step to love, peace and unity across racial lines is to acknowledge the reality of racism experienced by Blacks. Without an awareness of the reality of racism, ‘one love’ is not only unrealistic, but will also be perceived as an offensive rhetoric by many Blacks.

While Rasta symbolism is often used by ‘white Rastas’ on the Reasoning Forum, several of the main spokespersons of the SELF community do not speak Dread Talk nor use other Rasta symbols to any significant degree. Most of them do not wear dreadlocks nor smoke ganja, neither do they believe in the divinity of Haile Selassie or ascribe to him any significant role. However, in terms of consciousness these people are probably “more” Rasta than many of those who wear dreadlocks, smoke ganja, worship Selassie and speak Dread Talk. Having a highly developed Rasta consciousness and a secure Rasta identity, they are perhaps less inclined to put their Rasta identity on public show by using the outward symbols. While the Rasta “look” has become commercialized and fashionable among people with a limited understanding of the underlying philosophy, it has lost much of its meaning and potential to disrupt and “scare” the establishment, which was indeed a main element of Rasta resistance both in Jamaica, England and elsewhere in previous decades. External Rasta symbols have been effectively contained and have lost much of their disruptive potential, so that the use of such projects an image of Rasta as another commercial fad rather than as a revolutionary philosophy. While in the past, the symbolic use of dreadlocks affirmed African identity and scared whites, today this hairstyle is fashionable to whites. Reggae music is still a powerful instrument to recruit ‘white Rastas’, but whether they search for the deeper meanings behind the symbols remains an empirical question. My study suggests that very few ‘white Rastas’ who approach this website are aware of the underlying Black ethos that drives the movement, although they eagerly use the symbols.
Despite its ideological influence, Rastafari has remained marginal as a social movement. Hall (1985) contends that in order to have any real historical effects, ideologies must be linked to social movements, where symbols can mobilize for collective action. According to Collins (2000), Black resistance in social movements consists of two complementary forms of action which are equally necessary for social change. The struggle for autonomy on the cultural level, in the form of Black Nationalism, seeks to create spheres of influence within existing structures and promote self empowerment through the construction of oppositional identities. The main activity here is internal consciousness-raising, while the struggle for institutional transformation aimed at racial integration, is fought through civil rights organizations, labor unions and revolts. Change on this political level relies on coalition-building external to the Black movement.

As a Black social movement, Rastafari appears to be primarily involved in consciousness-raising and the struggle for cultural autonomy, which serves as a collective platform from which smaller groups of Rastas may take up political struggle. On the Reasoning Forum, Black Rastas are finding other ways to express Rasta consciousness, affirm African identity and struggle against racism without using the classical Rasta paraphernalia. In their critique of racism, Biblical language has been largely replaced by the language of social theory, for instance is ‘white supremacy’ often preferred to ‘Babylon’ on the forum. Whether Rastas express themselves in political language, participate in institutional politics, or become indistinguishable by outward appearance, the defining feature of Rasta lies in their spiritual consciousness and their commitment to social justice. Rastafari remains a spiritual movement aimed at personal and collective empowerment and the development of consciousness. In terms of external alliances, there are several participants on the Reasoning Forum who do not call themselves Rasta, but who share the spiritual consciousness and commitment to social justice. These persons are often seen by others as closer to the ethos of Rasta than those who label themselves as such and wear their identity on their bodies rather than in their hearts and minds.
Early Internet theorists seemed to be excited about the revolutionary potential of this new technology. Optimists suggested it would bring about global democracy and equality, whereas pessimists feared it would erode social relations. In their excitement, they seemed to forget that the Internet is primarily a new technology for mediated communication. Wilson and Peterson (2002) emphasize that changes have been less dramatic than expected, and that most internet use is connected to everyday practices and power relations.

Taking as a point of departure that online interaction may not be so different from other types of social interaction after all, I will in this chapter discuss the implications of taking the central Rastafari activity of reasoning from the yards of Jamaica to online discussion forums on the internet. The principles of reasoning are influenced by an alternative epistemology discussed in the introduction, where knowledge is evaluated in terms of its connection to personal experience and moral integrity. Initially, it may seem difficult to connect knowledge to the personal dimension when communicating over the internet. However, the Reasoning Forum shows how Rastas are able to overcome this challenge.

**Reasoning and consciousness-raising**

While reasoning in the Caribbean yards often involves ganja smoking and drumming, the purpose of online reasoning is basically the same. The most significant difference between online and offline reasoning is that online reasoning consists of written interaction instead of the spoken word. Barry Chevannes (1994) describes reasoning as a ritual drama centered on words, but which involves more than the exchange of words. He makes sense of this level of reasoning with reference to the *nommo*, an African philosophical concept where language acquires a power on
deeper levels than the literal meanings of words. Interestingly, the Reasoning Forum shows that also written online interaction goes beyond the level of mere words, and contains deeper levels of meaning than the literal. Edmonds (1998b) describes reasoning as an open-ended and informal discussion or dialogue aimed at the inter-subjective exploration of truth. Reasoning is aimed at reaching agreement and consensus, and produces knowledge which is always open to further elaboration in subsequent reasoning. The ideological statements of Rastafari are thus not bound by dogma, but open to constant reinterpretation, and its philosophy is a practical guide to conduct and attitudes rather than a doctrine in the Western rationalist sense. (Hall 1985) No Rasta can justifiably monopolize truth, as knowledge is constantly reinterpreted in pursuit of more and more clarity. (McFarlane 1998)

On the Reasoning Forum, Ayinde gives his interpretation on how to reason,

Reasoning is a discussion in pursuit of higher meaning. … To reason on an issue, parties must have some familiarity with the subject matter and are prepared to re-evaluate their views and opinions when a higher truth is presented. … Reasoning is a very sacred thing as what is being said must be the truth, as the speakers understand it. It involves the exchanges of meaning and not simply repeating words that both parties interpret differently.

He further relates reasoning directly to consciousness-raising,

Reasoning is about the realization of higher truth and requires honesty and willingness to question one’s own perceptions. Conscious development means becoming conscious of one’s self and realize oneself in the world. Becoming conscious is something everybody can do, yet it seems that few are willing.

He indicates that reasoning requires a high level of honesty and integrity, implying that participants are expected to relate to what is said on a personal level. The core members of this online community have highly developed skills in evaluating conduct in reasoning, so that the dialogue is lifted to higher levels than the presentation of different viewpoints. While this is the ideal of reasoning, in practical terms participants on the forum have varying reasoning skills. Sometimes reasoning degenerates into repetitions of mere words, consecutive monologues, or ideological confrontations were neither party is prepared to re-evaluate their views.
An interesting form of reasoning on the forum, which indicates some of what I have vaguely referred to as “higher levels” may be described as meta-reasoning, that is, reasoning about reasoning, or reasoning that observes, analyzes and comments on itself. This kind of self-reflective activity analyzes and comments on how people reason, on their hidden agendas, and on their emotional reactions. It is as if the participants in a discourse perform critical discourse analysis on themselves, on others, and on their own discourse. Ayinde indicates,

> Often, reasonings on these boards are developed based on either an experience with someone or an observation within a discussion on the very board. I deliberately placed it in a general context utilizing observations from past and recent experiences.

It is a common practice among Rasta to phrase criticism in general rather than personal terms, and in this way letting the recipient of criticism “choose” for himself whether it applies to him or not. On the Reasoning Forum, people often reveal that “the cap fits” through their emotional reactions. Sometimes a participant denies that a certain critical remark applies to her, but the degree of emotion and defensiveness in her reply may unwittingly betray her words. Rather than letting a general remark pass, some people “choose” to defend themselves against it, and thereby reveal that they take it personally. It is often pointed out that the primary purpose of the Reasoning Forum is personal development rather than intellectual debate. Ayinde elaborates,

> If people feel to engage a Rasta setting then it is understood that they must come as they are with all their faults. Pointing out the race, gender, and superiority complex issues are about correcting perceptions and attitudes. … Are people coming to the table to learn and then help improve, or are they participating with continuing ignorance hoping to change that which they do not understand?

We will see a number of examples of people who learn and improve when criticized, as well as others who deny and counterattack. A number of whites attempt to redefine Rastafari philosophy before they have developed an awareness of its subtleties. More interesting is it that many whites are willing to learn and reevaluate their perceptions.

Whenever a white person or someone with a “Eurocentric consciousness” enters a Rasta reasoning, they will be confronted and challenged by Rastas. Chevannes (1994) reports how he was identified with Babylon by the Rastas he reasoned with during his fieldwork in Jamaica.
Regardless of his skin color, the fact that he came from the university made him a representative of the establishment. This anthropologist’s experience resembles what often happens on the Reasoning Forum, when outsiders who operate from a Eurocentric perspective are challenged by Rasta. It is a common practice of both online and face-to-face reasoning, to “burn fire on Babylon” as Muata does in the following response to a ‘white Rasta’,

Trying to define I Rasta culture will eventually bring an unbearable, unfathomable internal curse upon your soul in torment! … True love is the fiyah of truth! GLORIFY AND SANCTIFY HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY HAILE SELASSIE THE FIRST, KING OF KINGS, LORD OF LORDS CONQUERING LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH, NYABINGHI I ROYAL IMPERIAL PATRIARCHAL BLACK SUPREMACY STAND 4 IVER RASTAFARI BUN FIYAH, CRASH LIGHTNING AND THUNDA FI BABYLON DOWNPRESSOR. SELAH … Anyone who would try to compromise the fullness of it, I curse, with the fiyah of JAH! RASTAFARI IS BLACK SUPREMACY FROM THE ROOT TO THE BLOSSOM 4-IVER & IVER SELAH!

Chevannes (1994) interprets the face-to-face version of the above as “symbolic violence.” Rasta aggression towards the “Eurocentric mindset” is carried out ‘spiritually’ rather than by physical force. Iyah360, a white man with a longer history of participation on the Reasoning Forum gives the following advice to the ‘white Rasta’ cursed by Muata above,

He is burning out the “WANNABE” Rastas who come with the white mindset, seen? His was not a personal attack, he is correcting the I’s trod! Learn to respect this, stand in the fire and DON’T GET BURNED! … You cannot reason with a burning fire … let it burn, let it do its job of purifying.

In Rasta terminology, one may say that the attack is directed at his ‘false consciousness’ rather than at his ‘true self.’ It represents an assault on “white collective consciousness” rather than at the person who happens to be socialized into thinking this way. Rather than taking it as a personal attack, the ‘white Rasta’ in question is advised to “stand in the fire and don’t get burned.” However, he is requested to take criticism personally enough to reevaluate his perceptions and behavior. In a sense, it is recognized that he is not to blame for his attitudes and conduct because he has not chosen his primary socialization. On the other hand, he is encouraged to become aware of unconscious and taken-for-granted attitudes and behavior, and held responsible for changing that which is offensive. From this perspective, it is not that all whites are “guilty” of internalized racism; however, they are personally responsible for “unlearning” it, and this requires an awareness of racism resulting from verbal confrontation with Blacks.
Wilson and Peterson (2002) point out that the Internet is not growing apart from the world, but is increasingly embedded in it. Hence, the distinction between real and virtual communities is not very useful. An anthropological approach is well suited to investigate a continuum of communities regardless of the ways in which community members interact. Online groups exhibit a wide range of characteristics and serve a variety of purposes, from “limited areas of the internet where people engage in fantasy play that is intentionally disconnected from their real-world identities,” to online communities that are “centered around offline ethnic or national identities.” (ibid.) The Africa Speaks community is of the latter type, where online interaction is influenced by offline power relations and constructions of identity, including gender and race. Online identities are tied to credibility and context. (ibid.) Miller and Slater (2000), in their study of the Internet in Trinidad, report that most websites emphasize Trinidadian nationalism rather than ethnic identities, and that Internet interaction seems to be rather apolitical compared to the importance of political discussions elsewhere in Trinidad. The Africa Speaks website, based in Trinidad, thus seems to be an exception. It focuses on racial identities, is highly political, and the only form of nationalism promoted is Pan-African Black Nationalism.

It follows that this website, focusing on Black Nationalism and racial issues, may be politically controversial. In a background article on the websites, we are informed that SELF used to run a radio show discussing the same issues which was eventually taken off the air due to political controversy. On the Reasoning Forum, a few people express being provoked and shocked by discussions of race. Two new participants write,

InI newbie to these boards… and currently member to other boards wit other organizations… InI am shocked at the issues of “race” here… InI have never come upon a board like this…

InI also feel shocked by the race thing going on here. I come from other message boards that wouldn’t go dere…
These comments support the impression that race and racism are not widely discussed on the internet. Many other Rastafari websites and discussion forums do not address racism. Many of these are run by ‘white Rastas’. The frank discussions of racial issues on the Africa Speaks website seem to provoke many participants who feel uncomfortable discussing racism, especially those who receive racial privileges in the wider society. A number of Blacks insist that these issues must be addressed and confronted. Ayanna expresses the position of SELF on racial issues, stating that truth and honesty are far more important than the idea of simply “getting along” by avoiding conflict and sweeping difficult issues under the rug. She writes,

We discuss issues very openly and plainly here, no eggshells to walk on, and no claims of peace and love and blessings all the time to cloud the issues. They are tough and they must be dealt with plainly. … Do not feel that African people must not then be angry and hard-hitting in their responses and opinions. We have a right to be in dealing with ALL injustices. … We respect each other and try to reason respectfully but playing nice is not really a prerequisite.

Ayinde elaborates on the importance of facing tough issues of racism with honesty;

People should not simply tolerate each other or else when one side gets the upper hand they simply oppress the other as many Blacks have experienced. … These critical examinations are to ensure that we are not repeating historical errors and ‘sleeping with the enemy’ sometimes quite literally. Too often people get caught up with only the symbols of things when right below the cosmetics the same oppression persists … even among those who hail Rastafari.

Ayinde indicates what I mentioned before, that these Rastas emphasize the ‘substance’ underlying symbolism and political ideology. The critical examination of people’s personal integrity in the struggle for justice is a central issue, and there is a high level of critical reflection around the credibility of online identities and their correspondence with offline identities. Benjamin, the Nigerian, comments,

Rasta is not about Internet Rasta … Rasta has come to uplift Black people. Are you prepared to do this, in action rather than engaging in Internet intellectual battle? The real war is out here in the streets, in corporations, in your home, with your friends, in your school, in the church.

Nyamabla, a 31 years old African American man from Washington D.C., shows a general skepticism towards discussing racial issues on the Internet,
The worst place for this reasoning to come forward is on the net. Only on the net could a white person enter this reasoning.

U come to the net speaking of true to life situation u say happened. I & I wasn’t there, so all the I’s dem can do is take your word.

Despite the skepticism expressed above, many people on this forum discuss racial issues on the basis of their personal experiences. Others present their viewpoints and ideological statements. Tracey reflects on the correspondence between online personas and offline persons. She writes,

Personas are interesting things here on the internet … Many altered and split personas come onto the screen to play with the various points of views and give wings to a voice that otherwise might stay hidden within the physically seen world of face-to-face interactions … here … one can freely express words, opinions, and views … one is a bit anonymous, as the body is seemingly hidden behind the screen and all we have is their word … or do we? Certainly there is much more…

Tracey indicates that there is more than words, and that experienced members have highly developed skills in discerning people’s intentions and evaluate their character on the basis of how people conduct themselves in reasoning. They have acquired a general knowledge of who typically promotes what kind of arguments, and challenge the credibility of new members. Ayinde comments,

Many of the people on the Internet claiming blackness are white or … hiding behind the symbols of blackness. But by their conduct they are no different to the white system they condemn, and are not addressing issues in a manner that shows any understanding of dark-skinned Africans.

He indicates that it is possible to make an educated guess at a person’s skin color by analyzing her statements. Sometimes the lack of personal experience to back up a certain argument may reveal a person’s skin color. At other times, more subtle things like attitudes, assumptions and expectations can be read between the lines. Kelani comments,

How can we be really sure if anyone here is who they say they are? The so-called black posters on this board display white supremacist agenda. … Being Black is more than just a physical appearance; it is a frame of mind. There is a way to tell who or what a person are on this board. I’m all eyes to see it…

While some remain skeptical, several of the persons quoted above claim to have the ability to read a person’s racial identity out of their standpoint. More often than not, the people who claim to be able to do so are Black or in some cases whites who are familiar with Black perspectives.
They evaluate statements according to the criteria of an epistemology that links knowledge to experience and action. Reading “hidden agendas” between the lines is not only done by Rastafari, but also by critical discourse analysts.

**Critical discourse analysis**

The epistemological struggle over whether to take knowledge claims at face value or to search for hidden agendas is also played out in the field of discourse analysis. There has been a tendency among mainstream discourse analysts to limit analysis to the surface structures of texts. On the other hand, there is a long tradition of critical discourse analysts with an overtly political agenda. Ruth Wodak (1996) points out that critical discourse analysis sides with oppressed groups in identifying the hidden agendas of hegemonic ideologies. Foucault himself was concerned with reality as much as with textual discourse, and was personally and politically committed to promote social justice by speaking truth to power. Later discourse analysts have criticized Foucault for his negligence of agency, which may leave an impression of total hegemony with few possibilities for resistance. Said (1979), van Dijk (1993) and Iver B. Neumann (2001) have applied critical discourse analysis to social scientific studies of hegemony while allowing more space for agency. This perspective is well-suited for a critical analysis of the current ‘new’ racism which is disguised by the theory of liberal individualism, which neglects the analysis of social power structures.

Identity consists of two aspects, self-presentation and identification by others. In the context of racism, racial identity is primarily about social classification by others rather than self-perception. (Makalani 2003) On the Reasoning Forum, Ayanna points out that it is the perception by others that counts,

When we look at the system, as it exists, we often have to realize that although we ourselves are not prejudiced (or so we think) it is often … how we are perceived by others as much as how we perceive ourselves that counts. It’s how we are perceived that benefits us in this system. As a white person you do benefit.
From the perspective of a Black person, no matter how “white” she perceives herself to be, she will still be judged by others on the basis of her skin color. Similarly, no matter how much a white person feels that her skin color is irrelevant, in many instances she will still be treated favorably to a Black person. This is what we will refer to as “white privilege.” (Frankenberg 1993) On the internet as in face-to-face interaction, people are free to present any identity they like, but others will not necessarily accept their presentation of self. It must be credible to others, so the question is how to establish credibility. On the Reasoning Forum, four aspects of self-presentation can be distinguished and evaluated. These are pictures, explicit statements, implicit perspectives, and behavior in interaction. All these four aspects are racialized to various degrees. Pictures show skin color, explicit statements refer to a person’s self-identification, implicit perspectives reveal a person’s consciousness, which is influenced by racialized experiences, and finally, a person’s conduct in a discussion reveals something about her position in the social hierarchy. In a social structure defined by racism, whites will tend to show authoritarian behavior towards Blacks. In these online discussions, this refers to the attempts to impose a ‘white’ definition of reality on Blacks, through the use of various “dominating strategies.”

When there is a degree of correspondence between a person’s appearance on a photo, her explicit statements about herself, her implicit perspectives as well as her conduct in a discussion, we can establish her racial identity with a certain degree of credibility. The primary aspect of self-presentation is the conscious and explicit statements people make about themselves. In Erving Goffman’s (1971) terminology, this is the information given. The implicit aspects of self-presentation, Goffman calls the information given off. In face-to-face communication, this is primarily body language. In online interaction, discursive information is given off implicitly and often unconsciously, and these “hidden agendas” can be read “between the lines.” In terms of discourse analysis, discussion conduct refers to style and tone, speech acts and timing. When people react with strong emotions at certain points in a discussion, this may reveal more about who they are than what they say. Just as body language is often inconsistent with verbal rhetoric in face-to-face communication, how something is presented can be compared to what is presented in online interaction. Lack of correspondence can be taken as an indication of hypocrisy or
dishonesty. For instance, a man who asserts that he respects women’s right to speak, while simultaneously trying to silence a woman in a discussion, lacks credibility and shows bad character. In online interaction, one may not literally interrupt another’s post, but there are numerous other techniques for imposing one’s views and disrupting discussions. Illegitimate interventions include personal attacks, unsubstantiated accusations, distractions from the topic, drawing attention to oneself, deliberately distorting others’ views, monopolizing dialogue and plain rudeness. These and other techniques are frequently used in the everyday enforcement of sexist and racist domination. In this way, superiority and dominance is established, expressed and reinforced through discursive interaction. (Essed 1991, van Dijk 1993, Chambers 1998, Freire and Shor 1987, Ås 1981)

Linguistic information such as spelling may indicate someone’s level of education, and reveal class background. Subtle distinctions between American and British English may indicate someone’s origin or location. Dialects like Caribbean patois, African American Ebonics or Rastafari Dread Talk may reveal an African American background, a Caribbean background, or at least some knowledge of Rasta terminology. However, this does not necessarily tell us much, as many young whites imitate Black accents and dialects. Consequently, linguistic variation plays a minor role in my own analysis. Rather, following the lead of critical discourse analysis, I focus on how perspectives and consciousness are influenced by personal experience. Anyone may talk about a subject in abstract terms; however they may not be able to link their ideological positions to personal experience. Any discussion of racism is likely to give us significant insights into the racial identity of the participants, for several reasons. First, racism is a sensitive issue which provokes emotional responses from both Blacks and whites. Whites are often afraid of being accused of racism, and may get angry if they are. Blacks, on the other hand, get angry for not being taken seriously when they recount experiences of racial discrimination or point out racism. Second, lacking personal experiences of racial discrimination, whites tend to speak about racism in abstract and general terms and view it as a theoretical problem. Blacks who have frequent personal experiences with racism are sensitive to the subtleties and nuances in concrete manifestations of racism which are almost impossible to understand from a distance. So while
some people on the forum claim to be Black in order to justify their presence in Rastafari, they
tend to lack detailed experience-based knowledge about racism. Emotionally, they may identify
with the “wrong side” – and express anger as if they were accused of racism rather than being its
victim. Muata, a mixed-race African American, comments,

Race is discussed a lot here, and many people feel they are being attacked on the basis of their color. I
would like to remind these people that this is a meeting place of the minds. Your color can’t be seen here.
So if your whiteness shows it’s your reasoning, perspective, principalities, consciousness etc. that reveals it.
Your words are being judged, not your skin.

Here, Muata explicitly points out that skin color is reflected in perspectives and consciousness.
Due to racism, there are quite significant differences in how Blacks and whites experience the
world. Living on the privileged side, and receiving benefits of racism, unconsciously affects
individual perspectives. Individual experiences are thus socially constructed and collective.
(Frankenberg 1993) While there is enough correlation between experience and consciousness to
justify generalization about white and Black perspectives, consciousness is not completely
determined by experience.

Trust

Blacks and whites tend to have different perspectives on trust. On the Reasoning Forum, conflicts
often arise when a Black person challenges a white person’s expectation to be trusted. A white
Englishman responds in the following way when he is met with suspicion by Blacks,

Trust I, I am strong for the cause. It just puts sorrow in my heart to read some peoples views on “whites”
and Rasta, but again trust I… Give everyone a chance! False Rastas will be found out in no time at all. True
(white) Rastas deserve acceptance the same as Black Rastas!

This man is not the only white or light-skinned person who demands to be trusted on the
Reasoning Forum. A light-skinned African American woman writes,

InI should strive not to make judgments on other people, black or white. InI should take care to accept
everyone first, and then see if they have evil beliefs or intentions.
The expectation to be trusted, and the view that one should be accepted without initial suspicion, may be seen as an indication of a privileged position. (O’Brien 2003) Ayinde explains why many Blacks have a different view,

Some people appear to be all embracing at first glance but from my experience the people who start from a position of distrust then wait for trust to develop are the smarter few. People should not easily dismiss the lessons of history. Although the cautious ones may appear to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, in this life and death struggle for survival it is the safer position to adopt if one is not sure of the true motivations of others.

Bo Rothstein (2005) relates general social trust to beliefs in the fairness of a social system. If the political system is perceived as unfair, distrust is a rational response and tends to be generalized from a distrust of the system towards general distrust of others. Rothstein exemplifies this with the case of African Americans, who show higher levels of distrust towards whites as well as towards each other than white Americans do. He relates this to Black experiences with racial discrimination which fuel a general distrust of the social system, and argues that distrust is a rational response to historical betrayals of trust. Black distrust of whites is thus grounded in a long history of atrocities committed by whites against Blacks. (O’Brien 2003)

Another reason for distrusting ‘white Rastas’ and anti-racist activists who claim to fight on behalf of Blacks, is that Blacks are suspicious of their motives since whites do not seem to have a personal stake in the struggle against racism. Blacks question whether being Rasta is merely a superficial fad for whites, or whether they are really committed to the struggle on a personal level. Benjamin writes,

When I was growing up, enough white boys who were spotting locz in secondary [school and] particularly at University have now turned out to be the ones who are called “cool”. Where are they now in the black struggle? Nowhere, most of them are tucked away in their plush offices, comfortable families, and still oppressing and repressing Africans in their daily lives since they left schools. It was simply a phase of life they went through, so are many of the other dreadies.

Benjamin tells us about the dreadlocked white English students at his university, who like many other whites in the 1970s social movements, have become successful capitalists today. If ‘white
Rastas’ are Rasta only in a symbolic way, they are likely to drop out of the movement. In order to be trusted by Blacks, they need to go beyond rhetoric and integrate convictions into personality.

**Negotiating a credible identity**

As indicated by Ayinde’s statement above, core members of the Reasoning Forum generally distrust people’s intentions until proven trustworthy, and they often challenge participants’ self-presented identities. Since skin color is a continuum of shades between black and white rather than a simple dichotomy, and many Diaspora Blacks have at least some “white blood,” racial identities are constantly negotiated on the forum when self-presentations are challenged. Identities are negotiated in offline interaction in “the real world” as well, since agreement must be reached between self-identification and other-identification. A white person cannot simply take on the identity of a (Black) Rasta, neither in face-to-face social interaction nor in the mediated interaction on this Reasoning Forum, without facing challenges from others who identify the person as white. The following exchange illustrates this.

Ras Legacy: Is it really the skin color that matters, or the ideas beneath the skin? Does Jah not say that InI are not to judge others by appearances or nationalities?

Tracey: Ras Legacy… you must know that it is a luxury only a white one can afford to say. … It is my observation that it is only whites who come onto this board chanting that kind of rhetoric… I have yet to hear an African say anything of the kind. Why? Because that is not the reality for those whose experiences belie quite a different perspective.

Ras Legacy: I am not white…

Tracey: Are you “light”? Surely you may take offence at this question… but I ask because we have reasoned long time on these boards about this issue… in fact… many left the boards because it was such a volatile issue and got quite hot in here. … Look at it Ras Legacy… call it what it is… speak from your experience and let the real story be told.

Five months later…

Ras Legacy: When I was in junior high school… my white friends tried to “help” me look “cool”. They gave me white makeup to wear that had a much lighter tone than my skin color. Their main focus was to straighten my hair. … I still find people who tell me that I am lucky, because I can pass for a Hispanic/Latina woman….

When I first joined this board, I also thought that all people were equal, and it shouldn’t matter about superficial things, because InI gotta get together. I reasoned with this concept, and found that there are many factors that bar InI from coming together, mainly race.

64
In her last post, Ras Legacy speaks from personal experience and comments on her change of perspective. Tracey had thus correctly identified Ras Legacy as a light-skinned person on the basis of her perspective on racism.

Many people tend to present an image of self that they think will be favorably received by others, as well as relevant to the present situation, so there are often inconsistencies when one compares people’s statements over a longer period of time. In face-to-face communication, it may be difficult to notice these subtle inconsistencies, but on the internet forum previous statements are recorded in the archive and can be in many cases be retrieved by the observer. I will illustrate this with an instance where Mandingo is challenged on his racial identity. He has been active on this website since it was started four years ago. The following exchange involves Mandingo, Kelani and Out of Zion, a 22-year-old white American man.

Out of Zion: Mandingo, I thought the I was black this whole time. You live in Brazil… are you Brazilian & of Hispanic origin or white?

Mandingo: I’m a mixed person with Hispanic, Indian and Black origins and I look like a brown Arab.

Kelani: You are a mixed African? Since when have you appointed yourself a “multiracial” Black man? I recall you said on this board being of American Indian and European heritage. You never spoke of yourself as being “multiracial” white mixed with black or say anything about your African/Black heritage.

Mandingo: I remember mentioning my family roots before and from my memory I mentioned I had mixed origin. Mother’s family – Black and Arabs. Father’s side – Spanish; Portuguese, Indians. … Anyway, that’s not the most important thing in this reasoning.

Mandingo appears to be defensive, and tries to define the question of racial identity as irrelevant to the discussion, while it is quite important to the other participants. In the archive we find that he has given different versions of his racial identity. One year earlier, he wrote,

I was raised by a black woman, as my mother and father hardly lived with me… As I grew up I started to realize how I was attracted to everything related to black culture, to Africa… My … grandmother is Portuguese descendent, the other grandmother is Spanish descendent, the grandfathers are Arab descendents. Brown grandfathers and white grandmothers.
Six months later, he wrote,

I go to England I’m brown, Syrian, Afghan. In Brazil I’m white. … I was grown up by a black woman who came to be my mother even though she wasn’t my genetical mother.

Previous posts show that Mandingo did not say before that he is partly Black, justifying Kelani’s suspicions. His photo (see chapter 2) lends support to his statement that he “looks like a brown Arab.” Since his earlier statements are more detailed, they seem more credible. On the other hand, his vague claim to “Indian and Black origins” after having given detailed information on his grandparents, only makes sense in the context of his feeling defensive for being white.

Consistency over time, between explicit statements of racial identity, and implicit information of racialized experiences, together with pictures all contribute to increase credibility of a person’s self-presented racial identity. However, this does not mean that identifying participants is always straightforward, as Rootsie acknowledges,

This Internet has its downside. Face to face we would be able to see each other more real, and discern intentions. Yes sis/bredren I did assume you are white! I am also feeling that you are a man, but I am a manly reasoner myself! You are black? I am surprised, for you surely do sound like many of the white folks who come around here…

In this case we do not know if the person Rootsie reasons with is really Black or simply claims to be so. This shows us that experienced moderators may sometimes be mistaken about another poster’s identity, in cases where the person is an exception to the general rule.

**Personal experience and integrity**

Tyehimba emphasizes the importance of honesty when addressing race issues,

After reasoning with a lot of people it is easy to recognize the language of those that feel personally threatened by something, bringing up all kinds of distractions to sidetrack the real issues. … Assertions of humility, loyalty, understanding, are words that can be uttered by anyone. … How people act in relation to their words when the going gets tough, will be the ultimate judge of their integrity. Reading a lot of books and gathering/repeating a lot of information does not bring integrity.
Tyehimba distinguishes between what people say and what they do. Acting with integrity implies a correspondence between words and action. Anyone can repeat words and claim to possess moral qualities, but if they do not act accordingly, they will appear as hypocrites. Evaluating character and discerning intentions is central in reasoning. Even on the internet, the conduct of people can be evaluated on the basis of how they say things. Tracey comments on how she evaluates people’s character,

> How you present yourself and what you present reveals a lot about your character and integrity… It’s not so much what you know that carries weight… but how you share it… Anyone can simply regurgitate vast quantities of info… but when one is willing to step out with their own voice and speak authentically from their own mind and personal experience… then we really begin to get to know and see who it is we are dealing with.

The above comments by Tyehimba and Tracey point us back to the Rasta epistemology discussed earlier. Both posts indicate that abstract knowledge lacks credibility unless the person who presents it can relate it to personal experience and behavior. As we noted earlier, Rasta epistemology perceives knowledge, experience and action to be intimately linked. The Rasta approach to the evaluation of knowledge claims resembles Collins’ Black feminist epistemology (2000:257-270), which she points out is common among African American women. Collins writes that individuals who speak from lived experience are more credible than those who have merely read about such experiences. The ideas of other persons may be best understood if one develops empathy and shares the experiences that influenced those ideas. Emotion indicates that the speaker believes in the validity of her argument. Assessing a person’s knowledge claims is thus simultaneously an evaluation of the character, values, and ethics of that person, because perspectives and actions are thought to derive from core personal beliefs. Perspectives are evaluated in a context of domination rather than as ideas divorced from political and economic reality. Partiality rather than universality is the condition of being heard, and those forwarding knowledge claims without owning their position are deemed less credible than those who do. By evaluating all knowledge claims in the light of personal experience and behavior, the allegedly objective and universal abstract knowledge typically forwarded by the privileged is effectively
delegitimized and revealed to be a reflection of the experiences and interests of the privileged. Claims of objectivity, universalism and neutrality are exposed as mystifying rhetoric.

**Revealing “hidden” racism**

I will conclude this chapter with a few illustrations of how my ‘informants’ on the Reasoning Forum challenge and confront “subtle forms of Eurocentrism and racism.” As noted earlier, based on their experiences, dark-skinned Blacks have the most sophisticated knowledge of subtle forms and nuances of racism, while most whites unwillingly and unknowingly reproduce it in their everyday lives. However, there are a number of whites on the forum who have learned to recognize and point it out. Kebo, a young white American man, explains it in the following way,

> The reasoning forum also shows that there is no way to hide racism when individuals reason, it comes out and it looks hidden to the speaker perhaps but its on the page and this forum recognizes it, racism is always recognized here.

What are these subtle forms of racism Kebo refers to? Racism may be hidden in language, stereotypes and symbolism, as well as in taken-for-granted assumptions and habitual behavior. In white-dominated societies, Blacks often accept interaction on white people’s terms, either they have internalized the hegemonic white ideology or pretend to do so as a strategy of diplomacy and deceit. (Chambers 1998, Scott 1985) In everyday interaction, Blacks often ignore racism even though it offends them and they recognize it as such. Blacks may view non-response as the most appropriate reaction to everyday racism, because confrontation often leads to ridicule, accusations of oversensitivity, or physical danger. (O’Brien 2003) This Black-controlled forum, however, represents an autonomous space where Blacks are free to reject white terms of interaction. Even the most subtle forms of racism are regularly confronted here. While Black subordination in everyday life often prevents whites from gaining awareness of racist behavior, on the Reasoning Forum whites have the opportunity to be openly challenged, so that they may learn through confrontation what exactly offends Blacks. Let us now analyze a few examples.
The first example reflects the stereotypical eroticization of Black women. The following exchange between Kebo and Kristine is taken from a discussion of why Black men tend to favor light-skinned women.

Kebo: Black women are more fun, more beautiful, the most sexiest and they’re better in bed. And of course, just as intelligent. Don’t get me started on Black women.

Kristine: If you think this is flattering you really don’t know women at all… so women especially black women are only about having fun, looking good and sex… and just as intelligent as an afterthought… with a qualifier… just as…

Kebo seems to be sincerely trying to make a positive statement about Black women, but without taking into consideration how it might be perceived by Blacks/women.

The next example reflects the color symbolism of white and black. Kebo is skeptical about a critical evaluation of the US government as a representative of evil forces.

Kebo: Is that point of view too black? Is the US government evil to the core? Just maybe there is some good intelligent reasoning behind moves the government has made and movements it has supported like globalization. Maybe not. Is it all black and white?

Kelani: What is your purpose in using color symbolism here Kebo? Are you referring to the way black activists give speeches about social imperfections in the US and the black plight? Are you assuming it simply reflects bias on the part of black people?

Christian color symbolism, where white represents good and black represents evil, has historically played a significant role in racism, and these associations are still implicit in our language even though seldom acknowledged by whites. (Myers 2003) Some further examples of color symbolism with underlying racial connotations include “black magic” referring to the supposedly evil nature of African magic, “white lies” corresponding to general assumptions of white innocence and good intentions, and “black market” referring to an African preference for informal transactions. (Kivel 1996)

The final example reflects white paternalism towards Blacks. Although a white person may simply want to help Blacks, within the current power relations this is often perceived as
patronizing and arrogant towards Blacks. The action of charity gives the white person a positive image as caring and altruistic, while at the same time boosting his feelings of superiority and reinforcing a relationship of dependency. This is an exchange between Jeff, a white American man, and Ayinde.

Jeff: Greets Ayinde… I wanted to email you concerning contributions to the center that runs these boards, money, barter or otherwise…

Ayinde: Why highlight my name on this public forum to publicize your “desire” to “contribute”? It’s all about a show for some people. I am certainly not a poor begging African.

Whites are often not aware that their well-meaning attempts at offering help to supposedly needy Blacks may come across as patronizing. On the Reasoning Forum, several white people have learned what is offensive to Blacks. As in the examples above, Kristine often points out to other whites what is offensive in their statements. She advises other whites, “Choose your words carefully as your words are what are used to discern your intentions…” I have given a few examples of what is meant by terms like subtle, hidden, unconscious or unintentional racism, and how it is confronted. Further examples and analysis of the various forms of everyday racism on the Reasoning Forum will be presented in chapter 7. In the next chapter, I will analyze narratives of racist experiences in the world beyond the Reasoning Forum, which are discussed on the forum. These will be interpreted within the context of structural racism, or white supremacy.
Rastafari … challenges the entire Western World to come to terms with the history of slavery, the reality of white racism and the permanent thrust for dignity and self respect by black people.

Horace Campbell (1985:1)

We noted earlier that Rastas are social analysts who approach the problem of their oppression empirically. While many Blacks use the Biblical term Babylon as a metaphor and symbol for the reality of racism they face, the term ‘white supremacy’ is more widely used on the Reasoning Forum. White supremacy is a term that is commonly used by Black scholars to describe the global social structure of white dominance. Frances Lee Ansley distinguishes three levels in his definition of white supremacy as,

A political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white sub-ordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Quoted in Mills 2003:37)

White supremacy can be conceptualized on three levels, material power structure, cultural ideas of white superiority, and individual behavior in social interaction. This term is more accurate than racism because it includes all aspects of white dominance over Blacks and other people of color, covering material and cultural domains, structural and personal dimensions, while explicitly excluding so-called “reverse racism.” While in this thesis I emphasize the cultural aspects, including the religious, psychological, intellectual and scientific domains, these are related to the material dimension of white supremacy which includes military, political and economic imperialism in the historical eras of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. For historical studies of Western imperialism from an African perspective, I would like to refer the reader to
Walter Rodney’s (1972) historical account of the colonization of Africa, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Manning Marable’s (2000) study of the oppression of African Americans, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, and Kwame Nkrumah’s (1965) account of *Neo-colonialism*. In this chapter, I will analyze the structural level of white supremacy on the basis of Black narratives of experiences of racism. In chapter 7, we will investigate how conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority, privilege and entitlement are expressed by white individuals in personal interaction with Blacks on the forum itself.

**Racism and colorism in the Americas**

Charles Mills (2003) points out that white supremacy has taken on a new form since the 1960s, when official segregation ended in the US and the former European colonies gained formal independence. He notes that the term white supremacy has “disappeared” from mainstream white American discourse, where it now only refers to pre-1960s history and to ideologies of extreme-right groups. Black scholars on the other hand use the term to describe the current social structure, and claim that it still has relevance as an analytical concept. Mills points out that, “power relations can survive the formal dismantling of their more overt supports,” so that “white supremacy has not vanished but has changed from a *de jure* to a *de facto* form.” (ibid. p. 36-37)

Further, white supremacy characterizes not only the United States but the Americas as a whole, as people of African descent have been stigmatized and subordinated in most Latin American countries. (ibid.)

The point is often made that US racism is bipolar (white vs. black) and therefore different from the multi-layered color hierarchy, ‘colorism’, predominant in the Caribbean and in Latin America. In this regard, Tyehimba writes,

> In America, once you have one drop of Black blood you are considered black. However there is a next point to consider, that there are distinctions made among Black people according to their complexion. Thus persons who look almost white, or have light skin, are given preferential treatment over darker Africans.
Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that US racism is currently developing towards the Latin American model of colorism, where certain groups of people of color are integrated into the white elite as “honorary whites.” This means that white privilege is extended to people of a near-white complexion. According to Bonilla-Silva, this development is likely to accelerate the practice of “whitening strategies” already well known from the Caribbean and Latin America. Despite the “one drop” rule of bipolar racism, light-skinned African Americans have been “passing for white” for a long time. As documented by numerous Black scholars (Collins 2000, hooks 2000, Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992), colorism, light-skin privilege, and whitening strategies are evident also in Black America, especially for women, and the topic causes great controversy among African Americans.

Most members of the Africa Speaks community live in the US or in the Caribbean. The regional differences between US bipolar racism and Caribbean colorism should be kept in mind when we discuss the perspectives of Caribbean and American Blacks in the next chapter. In many Caribbean countries, the number of whites is minimal, the elite consists of brown people, while dark-skinned Blacks often constitute the majority. The light-skinned elite, called ‘mulattos’ or ‘mestizos’, derive their claims to superiority from their partial European ancestry. In countries such as Trinidad and Guyana, the color hierarchy is further complicated by a large number of East Indians, who also tend to claim a higher rank than dark-skinned Blacks. Although the national ideologies promoted by the elite in various Caribbean countries seek to deny the existence of colorism, it is more widely acknowledged in the Caribbean than in the US. Light-skinned African Americans tend to deny colorism in a similar way, instead promoting an idea of Black unity against whites, while at the same time they constitute a light-skinned elite protecting their privileges at the expense of dark-skinned Blacks. These structural dynamics constitute the context for the individual experiences of US and Caribbean Blacks of different shades on the Reasoning Forum. They are also reflected in their varying positions on racism and colorism. White supremacy takes different forms in different regions, but also has a range of similarities on a global scale.
According to Bonilla-Silva (2003), post-1960s “new racism” is characterized by being covert and subtle, hidden behind an ideology of color blindness, which allows white people to complain about “reverse discrimination.” The mechanisms of “colorblind racism” have thus become almost invisible to whites. Some people of color are incorporated into the system to serve as tokens of integration, while at the same time racial segregation is rearticulated. In current social theory; neither the term nor the concept of white supremacy is generally accepted as a description of the current state of global affairs. Using the term today, Mills writes, reflects “a radically different understanding of the political order,” which represents “a fundamental paradigm shift.” (2003:40-42) He further points out that this paradigm – “race as central, political, and primarily a system of oppression” – has always been present in oppositional African American thought, but has only recently been included in academic study programs such as Whiteness Studies. (ibid.)

**Structural racism**

Racism in the economic and political dimensions serves as a background for properly understanding the cultural dimension and these issues are also discussed on the Reasoning Forum. Consequently, I will treat these issues briefly. Kelani identifies some forms of racial discrimination in the material dimension that Black people face in the US and elsewhere; high rates of unemployment, incarceration and poverty, as well as being “reminded of our racial identity every single day.” Collins reports that African American women “encounter racism in everyday situations in workplaces, stores, schools, housing, and daily social interaction.” (2000:23) According to Bonilla-Silva (2003), African Americans systematically experience different forms of everyday racism, such as being unfairly fired, denied a promotion, harassed by the police, or not being hired for a job, and these subtle forms of everyday discrimination seem to be experienced by Blacks regardless of their economic position. In the final analysis, structural racism, like other systems of oppression, depends on physical violence. In the US “apartheid” system, the police carry out this violence. Kelani points out that, Blacks are targeted for “enslavement in the prison/industrial complex,” as well as for “police scrutiny and arrest based on their skin color.” Statistics do show that the US has the highest number of incarcerated
persons in the world, as a percentage of total population, and a disproportionately large number of these are Black. The privatization of the prison industry means that prisoners are forced to provide unpaid labor to private corporations, so that the so-called prison/industrial complex in fact represents a modern form of slavery. (Marable 2000)

In the US justice system, white people are systematically given the benefit of the doubt at the expense of Blacks. On the Reasoning Forum, Tico, a light-skinned Bahamian man, comments in this regard,

    When white folks hear that some white cop beat the crap out of a black guy they give the cop the benefit of the doubt because he’s white and a cop and the other guys don’t count for much, of course he’ll say it was cause he’s black but the white folks will pro’ly just think he was resisting arrest or something else of the sort.

Analyzing another empirical study, Amanda Lewis (2003) points out that a possible reason that white people receive the benefit of the doubt in American courts is that a white judge or juror unconsciously tends to identify with a white defendant. When a judge looks at a defendant that reminds him of himself, she writes, this implicitly fuels sympathy for the accused. Identification along racial lines may thus reinforce assumptions of white innocence and Black criminality. These racial stereotypes may affect any evaluation of a Black person by a white police officer, judge, juror, employer, bank official or real estate agent. On the Reasoning Forum, Poetic Princess, a 16-year-old Black woman, testifies to the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in the US,

    Why is it that we still get pull over for DRIVING WHILE BLACK in certain states? Why can 2 white cops beat the hell out of a hand cuffed BLACK teenager and a jury can come up indecisive and the federal government choose not to do anything? … Why is it a group of black males sitting together either talking or playing a game are consider either criminals or a gang? Why is it after 40 years of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that racial discrimination on the street, in the courts, in the workplace, just standing on the corner, is so alive and well?

Lewis (ibid.) also refers to the racial profiling practices by American police targeting Blacks on interstate highways, in neighborhoods and in stores.
Racial discrimination on the labor market maintains Black unemployment and poverty, as well as residential segregation, forcing the majority of Blacks to live in poor neighborhoods. Muata gives an example of the difficulties that face Black businessmen,

As a child I cried many a night after going to work with I father and seeing how white people treated him, store clerks looked at him so on; and many times he made more money then them, they'd still look down at him. I think he thought money would make him equal. He was one of the first black entrepreneurs in Pasadena, California. … I am also a black entrepreneur; owning I own business, now facing the same challenges as I father, doing things twice as good as everyone else to get the same credit.

Many Blacks report that they have to do things twice as good to get the same credit as a white person. Likewise, many women would recognize themselves in this position, of not receiving the same credit as a man would for the same job. Many Blacks continuously strive to be accepted as equal with whites by working twice as hard for the same pay, unfortunately contributing to their own exploitation.

**Eurocentrism – projecting white as normal**

Collins defines Eurocentrism as “an ideology that presents the ideas and experiences of whites as normal, normative, and ideal.” (2000:299) Mills (2003) follows Samir Amin in defining Eurocentrism as the denigration of non-European cultures, and placing Europe at the center of global history. Eurocentrism constitutes the cultural dimension of white supremacy. The psychological consequence of Eurocentrism is the internalization of an inferiority complex for many Blacks. (Fanon 1967) Similar to the Rasta theory, Black psychologists refer to this “collective mental illness” as ‘mental slavery’ (Akbar 1996) or ‘falsification of consciousness’ (Wilson 1993). Through Eurocentric socialization, white people have internalized their counterpart of the mental illness, which Fanon (ibid.) calls the white superiority complex. In order to investigate the different aspects of this, I will use empirical examples from the reasonings, and interpret them in the light of the theories of Black scholars.
A number of Black women on the Reasoning Forum can tell us about their personal experiences with Eurocentric standards of beauty. Ayanna, who grew up in a relatively privileged environment in Trinidad, writes,

As a child growing up I was surrounded by the feeling that lighter was better, that if the kink in my hair could relax just a teensy weensy bit, I would be more beautiful and maybe just maybe people would rush to play with my hair.

Kelani, who grew up in D.R. Congo (former Zaire), reports,

I used to get called names like “stupid,” “dirty” (as if I were a dog), “bwoa salite” in lingala, and “ugly” just because I wasn’t light since most of my family bleach their skin. In Congo, being “light is right”. Even amongst African people and more specifically Congolese people, if you are not light-skinned with relaxed hair you are considered ugly or not pretty.

Kelani is explicit on both the origins of the African preference for light skin, “the concept of beauty of the uneducated and miseducated African is inspired by Europe,” and its consequences, “the flaw in this state of mind is that it leads to self-hatred.” Leslie from Trinidad reports that she used to straighten her hair, in order to approach the European ideal of beauty,

I admit I was one of those who hated my kinky hair and had it chemically done. No longer is that the case. I hate to hear the excuse of manageability for straightening hair cuz if you loved your hair in the first place you would embrace the challenge.

The three stories above, as well as numerous others on the Reasoning Forum, indicate that ‘whitening strategies’ such as skin-bleaching and hair-straightening are widespread among Black women in the Americas as well as in Africa itself. On the Reasoning Forum, it is also pointed out that Eurocentrism and racism are responsible for this predicament, and it is further discussed how the ideals are spread through the media and how they can be changed. Ayanna comments that “almost universally we see the belief that “white is right,” forced down our throats by the American European dominated media.” She gives an example of an advertisement entitled “Mad hair” on the MSN homepage, with a picture of

the black American singer Macy Gray, an African woman who sports a natural Afro hairstyle. Next to the picture are the words “How to keep your wild locks under control.” With growing dread I click the link and
come to a page full of white, sleek haired, blond females who are held up as the icons of “sleek, beautiful hair”, while the beautiful hair of the sister on the front page is portrayed as the icon of the kind of hair that needs controlling, taming, that requires some gargantuan effort to make beautiful.

Ayanna comments on the subtlety and prevalence of these kinds of images, and that many Black women have become so desensitized that they take the ridicule of Black features for granted. Tyehimba concludes that “after being bombarded with Eurocentric propaganda for hundreds of years, the effect of internalization is very deep,” but suggests that “alternative forms of media such as this site” can help expose people “to the other half and from that they could make a choice.” In chapter 3, we noted how the positive affirmation of African identity and body features promoted by Rastafari helped Blacks to develop a healthier self-image, and that this is a central objective of these websites as well.

While Eurocentric ideals may be transmitted primarily through the popular media today, historically the church and the education system were the main agents of cultural imperialism. In the field of education, the subject of history is a prime example of Eurocentrism, from primary school all the way to university level. Not only is the academic discipline of history centered on European history, but the history of other people is systematically distorted and falsified, as only those aspects considered significant by elite white male historiographers were found worthy of inclusion. Africa has suffered the worst from Eurocentric historiography, being portrayed as a continent with neither history nor culture, needing to be redeemed by Europeans. Even archeological remnants of ancient African civilizations, such as Egypt and Zimbabwe, have been attributed to others, as Black Africans were thought incapable of having constructed them. (Mills 2003) While it is generally taught in universities that modern philosophy and science originate in classical Greece, this is in fact a Eurocentric distortion of history. Upon closer investigation, we find that Greek philosophy as well as Judeo-Christian religion has its roots in Ancient Egypt. (Diop 1974) This “cultural appropriation without acknowledgement” (Mills 2003:45) served to support the idea that Europeans are the only people capable of civilization.
Psychologist Amos Wilson (1993) writes about how Eurocentric history ‘falsifies’ Black consciousness by making Blacks unconscious of their own history. History is not only abstract knowledge of the past, he argues, but shows the sources of individual and collective behavior. If we are ignorant about our own history, we cannot understand why we behave the way we do. On the Africa Speaks websites and the Reasoning Forum, there is a strong focus on African history. Knowledge of African history is an important source for individual and collective Black confidence, self-esteem and identity. When African Americans change their names, it is directly related to history, as history creates the collective identity of a people. Collectively, African Americans used to be called Negroes, a European-imposed term from the slavery era. Individually, many African Americans have rejected their English-derived slave names and taken on African names. According to Wilson, naming themselves is an important aspect of Black liberation, which is also recognized by whites as an incursion on their power to dominate by naming and defining.

In the bodily dimension, Eurocentrism manifests itself in the white body ideal, which parallels the religious image of the White Jesus. (Akbar 1996) While historically the Christian church and its missionaries spread the Eurocentric idea that Jesus is white and the devil is black, today the white body ideal is spread by the entertainment industry and through the media. Mills (2003) writes that the white body ideal alienates Blacks and especially Black women, since the imperative to be beautiful is more important for women. This alienation manifests itself in attempts to transform the body to approximate the white ideal, through makeup, cosmetic aids and plastic surgery. Fanon (1967) pointed out that the differential social attractiveness of bodies will lead to a racialization of sexual relations. (Mills 2003) Among African American men, there is a widespread sentiment that the lighter the skin color of a woman, the more attractive she is. Spike Lee illustrates this problem in his movie *Jungle Fever*, where the main character, a successful Black businessman, has an affair with his white Italian secretary, cheating on his light-skinned African American wife. During slavery and segregation in America, mixed-race children were often the result of white men raping Black women (Collins 2000), while today biracial
children are more likely to have a white mother and a Black father (Makalani 2003), a reflection of Black men’s preference for light-skinned women.

**Colorism – light-skin preference and privilege**

The Eurocentric body ideal discussed above is related to the social structure of colorism. Striving for a white beauty ideal is not simply a matter of cultural preference or taste; it is connected to individual attempts to climb in the racial hierarchy, “passing for white.” In the US as well as in the Caribbean and Latin America, a “white look” pays off in the form of privileges. Collins reports that white-controlled institutions in the US “show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks, discriminating against darker ones or against any African American who appear to reject White images of beauty.” (2000:91) Following the extension of social and economic privileges to light-skinned Blacks, there is a correlation between skin color and social stratification also within the Black community. (Makalani 2003) In this regard, Rootsie asks on the Reasoning Forum,

> What sort of privileges do [light-skinned people] experience in the black community? If we look on rap videos with all those light-skinned girls dancing around the black mc, surely that tells us something? At the very least the media tells us that the Black who is most acceptable to Whites is the light-skinned one. Do Blacks also buy into this stereotype, even unconsciously?

Colorism is a sensitive issue in the Black community, particularly among light-skinned Blacks, who are often as unwilling to discuss their racial privileges as are white people. On the Reasoning Forum, Michele, a light-skinned African American student who writes a thesis on colorism, is one of few who is willing to discuss the issue. She tells us about her experiences from the lighter end of the color hierarchy,

> I too have had to deal with it my whole life… but from the other end… as a child, I was teased, taunted, and almost beat up because I was/am very fair-skinned… I thought, and still do sometimes, that it was a curse… I was accused of not being black enough.

With the rise of the Black Power movement in the 1970s, light-skinned Blacks often felt that they were “not black enough”. Ayinde replies that discrimination of light-skinned people by darker-
skinned Blacks is better understood as a “reaction to racism” rather than as “reverse racism.” He acknowledges that this “reactionary attitude” exists and needs to be discussed, writing,

Some children and adults do react to what they see as the preferences others have for fair-skinned ones and this conduct can also be a mask for envy. Many do not know a better way to tackle the problem so they resort to violence. Often teachers and parents show a preference for the light-skinned ones and some blacker children do pick this up and react to it.

Michele provides an example of reverse discrimination, which may be interpreted in terms of revenge against those who receive skin color benefits in mainstream society. Ayinde emphasizes that this form of reactionary discrimination does not in any way amount to the racism that darker-skinned Blacks experience, and that it does not prevent light-skinned ones from receiving racial privileges in wider society. He writes,

This does not stop the fair-skinned ones from participating and benefiting from wider antisocial attitudes in regard to color preferences. I know of cases of fairer ones being denied in certain instances because of their light complexion, but this in no way prohibits them from receiving many other forms of unconscious antisocial privileges.

Defining racism as a structure of dominance, Ayinde interprets reverse discrimination as a reaction to oppression rather than as ‘reverse racism’. Certain forms of ‘reverse discrimination’, such as the initial distrust of whites shown by many Blacks, as well as their insistence on self-determination and autonomy which requires leadership to be exclusively in Black hands, have often been justified in Black liberation movements. Other forms of reverse discrimination, such as claims to Black supremacy and superiority have more questionable legitimacy. One thing Black activists widely agree upon, however, is complete Black autonomy in deciding on the appropriate means of resistance. Black Power activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (1967) emphasized that privileged whites have no right to demand guarantees of non-violence. Fanon (1965) was one of the main proponents for the necessity of violence in anti-colonial liberation struggles. Rastafari has chosen to struggle primarily by non-violent means. These issues lead us to the next chapter, where we will analyze Black responses to white supremacy and the internal debates on the forms of resistance appropriate for Black liberation movements.
CHAPTER 6

The Black Liberation Movement

Rastafari ... effectively negates the white racism pervading the society, but also strives to overcome the logical premises which make any type of racism possible.

Joseph Owens (1976:57)

Race consciousness remains an integral part of the class consciousness of African peoples as long as Euro-American culture seeks to harmonise the economic and political domination of black peoples with attempts to destroy their cultural personality.

Horace Campbell (1985:1)

In this chapter, we will analyze the socio-political dimension of Rastafari in terms of social movement theory. As a Black liberation movement, Rastafari shares a number of characteristics with other historical and contemporary Black social movements such as Garveyism, Black Power, and Pan-Africanism. A central focus here will be on the struggle for autonomy in three interrelated dimensions; political self-determination, personal integrity, and movement leadership. (Scott 1990)

Black social movements

Despite early Rastas’ characterization of Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie in religious terms, as prophet and messiah respectively, the movement has always been influenced by their political philosophies. The Ethiopian Emperor was significant in the Pan-African struggle for decolonization, as well as in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). In the 1920s, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican political activist, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which became the largest organization in the Black liberation movement with its two million members. (Hall 1985) Rastafari builds on the philosophy of Garveyism, and it was Marcus Garvey who made Jamaicans aware of the coronation of Ras Tafari in Ethiopia in
Barrett (1974, 1977) made an interesting comparison between Rastafari and Black Power, which sheds some light on the significance of the spiritual dimension in Black struggle. He argues that spirituality has always been a central dimension in the lives of Diaspora Blacks, and thus for Caribbean social movements to be successful and relevant, they need a spiritual justification. This is illustrated by the difficulties of the English Black Power movement to recruit Caribbean immigrants on a primarily political basis. (Cashmore 1979) Black power was primarily political, and Black identity was perceived as instrumental to political mobilization. Rastafari largely shares the political ideology of Black Power, but integrates it into a holistic spiritual cosmology. Rastafari struggles for change in cultural consciousness as well as in the socio-political order. This twofold focus Rastafari inherited from Marcus Garvey, who emphasized the need for both mental and social liberation. (ibid.) Rastafari’s social analysis has certainly developed in sophistication as they have reasoned towards deeper and more elaborated levels of knowledge, and more information has become available, but Rastas have always approached their reality spiritually as well as rationally.

Gilroy (1993) writes that Black social movements, including Garveyism, Pan-Africanism, Black Power and Rastafari, are hemispheric, if not global phenomena, connecting the Americas with Africa and Europe. This transatlantic nature of Black resistance movements is a historical consequence of the triangular trade through which Europeans originally dislocated Africans to the Americas. These social movements reflect a tension between a politics of fulfillment and a politics of transfiguration, being simultaneously oriented towards pursuing the good life and resisting racism. Black social movements thus cannot be adequately conceptualized either in terms of political party, class, ethnic group, race or nation, because Black struggle pushes at the limits of what modernity has delineated as the approved space for politics. Black social movements reflect a theory of political agency where the priority of class relations is refused, and where the autonomy of culture from economic determination is demonstrated. (ibid.) As Alan Scott (1990) points out, Black social movements are primarily cultural rather than formally political in their practices, and defy the principles of bureaucratic rationality. They have combined the struggle for emancipation from slavery, for human status and citizenship, and for
political autonomy and self-determination. Gilroy (1993) conceptualizes these three goals of struggle in terms of three steps; first, gaining admission to the national community, second, making the national community live up to its rhetorical promises, and third, choose for themselves whether to integrate or to disassociate from that illusory community.

**Black Nationalism and ‘white Rastas’**

The Black struggle for political autonomy is most explicitly expressed in Black Nationalism. A common Pan-Africanist ideology connected the Black Power movement in the Caribbean, the USA and England, to the struggles for national liberation on the African continent itself. On the Reasoning Forum, Kelani calls for Black self-determination in a statement that echoes the Black Nationalist position expressed by Black Power activists Carmichael and Hamilton (1967). She writes,

> I am a Negroid Afrikan myself. I do not believe in the inferiority or superiority of my own ethnic group, any tribes or races. I do not believe our cry for a Negro black nationalism, independence and nationhood require us the Negro Blacks to dominate anyone. But I do believe it does require us the Negro Blacks to dominate, lead, and control ourselves!

Kelani makes it clear that she advocates self-determination and not Black domination over whites. This distinction is important because many whites perceive Black Nationalism as a counterpart to European imperialist nationalism. Rather than being ‘reverse racism’, Black Nationalism is a defensive nationalism. Several Black Rastas express the necessity of protecting themselves against white influence and appropriation of the movement, because ‘white Rastas’ tend to distract attention away from the Black struggle. Muata expresses this sentiment,

> If I learned anything from realstory it is to separate from white people, and not allow them inna I ites. … At best they may FOLLOW I culture, if they listen carefully to I&I, remain humble and acceptable in I&I sight. … They need to deal with correcting their own culture, so that some day, I&I may dwell together in harmony and balance, complementing each other!

Many ‘white Rastas’ have not solved the inherent paradox in their claims to be part of a movement whose purpose is to liberate Blacks from whites. Understandably, they are often
uncomfortable with the focus on Black liberation, and feel a need to justify their presence in the movement. On the Reasoning Forum, a white American, 15-year-old Tidjani, tries to redefine the meaning of “blackness” so that it may include him. He reasons, “Africa is the mother of humanity, which means of all humans…” In that sense, everybody is African. He continues, “You need blackness to be a Rasta… – not skin color… interior!” Rastafari is primarily about the affirmation of a Black consciousness. Finally, he writes, “Only racists matter if white or black SKINCOLOR.” According to the hegemonic definition of racism, Tidjani’s statement seems reasonable. However, from a Black perspective, his claim is interpreted as a reflection of a mistaken ideology, colorblindness, which denies the relevance of skin color as socially significant. In fact, skin color determines a person’s experience of racism, which is the *raison d’etre* of Rastafari as a social movement.

A number of ‘white Rastas’ identify their own sense of powerlessness in *Babylon* (the capitalist system) with Black experiences of racism. This identification translates into the idea that “we should all fight together against the common oppressor.” In response to white and light-skinned people’s calls to unity, Ayinde writes,

> The line, “let us all get together to fight the system” that seems to play down the privileges and abuses from light-skinned ones, can be taken to mean that we should all get together to promote light-skinned people.

Black feminist bell hooks* (2000) writes that while white feminists often assert that “all women are oppressed” and that “suffering cannot be measured,” she has never heard a poor woman of any race make such a statement. According to hooks, these assertions reflect a denial of the differential experiences of oppression caused by race and class. Echoing Ayinde’s response above, hooks characterizes the (white) feminist emphasis on common oppression as an appropriation of a radical political vocabulary that masks their promotion of their own class interests through the movement. Because of intersecting structures of race, class and gender oppression, ‘white Rastas’, like white women, are simultaneously oppressed and oppressors.

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* bell hooks (pseudonym for Gloria Watkins) defies scholarly conventions in her use of a pseudonym printed in lower case. Challenging cultural institutions such as the academe is a central part of her project. (E. Cashmore and C. Rojek (ed.): Dictionary of Cultural Theorists, 1999, Arnold, London)
although they are often unaware of the ways in which they benefit from the system. Both white feminists and ‘white Rastas’ tend to claim that they are equally oppressed as their Black counterparts, a claim that Black feminists and Black Rastas find offensive and strongly reject. White claims of ‘equal oppression’ are a reflection of their lack of awareness about racism and white privilege.

**The colorblind ideology**

Natty Fred, a white Englishman, addresses other participants as “Blacks/Whites/Spots&Stripes.” Other ‘white Rastas’ on the forum claim that they do not care whether people are “white, black, purple or green.” Listing non-existent skin colors to ridicule the notion of skin color as socially relevant, has been identified as a typical reflection of the “colorblind” ideology. (DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy and Post 2003) Another white Englishman, the 15-year-old Nattydread, explicitly points out that he is “trying not to see people by the colour of their skin.” In his response, Muata identifies this as a reflection of the “colorblind” ideology, and points out that it is unrealistic and offensive, “I’m tired of this rhetoric. … Stop trying not to see color, it needs to be seen. … This colorblind ideology is unrealistic and offensive, fantasy can’t help I&I.” Another white man on the Reasoning Forum expresses confusion at his encounter with race-conscious Blacks. He acknowledges the social significance of being white with the comments “I am white, straight, male,” “I see no discrimination,” “I am given things that I didn’t do anything for,” and “The white man has never been oppressed.” However, he expresses confusion about whether Black race consciousness, which insists on the social relevance of skin color, is racist when he asks, “Is reggae … racist cause now I see more differences between me and a black man?” As Diop (1974) points out, part of the confusion arises out of two different meanings of ‘race’ as genotype and phenotype. While the concept of ‘race’ as a meaningful genetic category has been effectively proven false, Black Africans continue to experience difficulties because of their physical appearance. Diop points out that when the concept of ‘race’ as phenotype is not favorable to whites, Black analyses of racism are undermined by denying the existence of ‘race’. This leads us to the hegemonic perspective on racism, “colorblind” ideology.
The colorblind ideology emerged in the early 20th century in the US as a progressive critique of essentialist racism and of racial inequality, and became the hegemonic ideology of race relations after the formal dismantling of racism in the 1960s. Like the ‘white Rastas’ quoted above, this view advocates that the solution to racism is “not to see race” and claims that “everyone is the same”, while sidestepping the issue of the relationship between skin color and power. In the 1980s, it was taken up by the political right to assist the liberalist disguise of the historical and structural dimensions of racism. (Frankenberg 1994) This view tends to define racism as individual prejudice and discriminatory behavior by people of any race rather than as a hierarchical structure where whites dominate Blacks. Race is then defined as an illegitimate topic for discussion, and those who are race conscious and insist on discussing racial issues may be accused of being racist. (Doane 2003) While a ‘colorblind’ perspective may be appropriate when structural racism is dismantled, it currently serves to obfuscate a reality where skin color is both visible and socially relevant. (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967) This ideology facilitates neglect of racial patterns in social interaction, and denies that white people constitute a social collective. (Lewis 2003) Rather than referring to a society where racial inequality has been eliminated, ‘colorblindness’ refers to “a discourse in which it is not permissible to raise the issues of race.” Within this discourse, inequality is explained as the result of individual failure rather than structural oppression, and thus the need for structural change is denied. (Doane 2003) The ‘colorblind’ ideology leads whites to believe that they contribute to the elimination of racism by not acknowledging race, with the result that whites perceive themselves to be innocent bystanders rather than active participants in the reproduction of racism. (DiTomaso et al. 2003)

The essentialist debate

As Gilroy (1993) points out, Black Nationalism is based on a sense of racial essentialism which is problematic because it largely ignores the internal differentiation of Black cultures. In an article on the Reasoning Forum, Ayinde expresses a perspective on the struggle against racism and for Black liberation that goes beyond Black Nationalism. He writes,
Some people choose to associate on the basis of material wealth; others associate because of social poverty and its related insecurities which helps drive a type of artificial racial bonding. … I call the bonding solely on the basis of race artificial because … it is not as if every white person will accept other whites and every Black will accept other Blacks. … All people evolved from a common family … there is no pure race as racial features can change. This explanation is not to discount the effects of early European pseudo science that tried to impute such. The effects of this ignorance are real and have done great damage to all sides.

Ayinde characterizes associations along racial lines as artificial, and thus rejects the basic premise of separatist nationalism. He identifies economic inequality as a central factor driving racial segregation, and thus refutes racial essentialism, while emphasizing that the social effects of racism are real. Ayinde’s analysis of ‘race’ resembles that of Gilroy (1993), who sees ‘race’ as the form in which class is experienced, in a social structure of racial inequality. Ayinde’s position on racial essentialism is also similar to Gilroy’s argument for anti-anti-essentialism. While strongly rejecting the forms of racial essentialism typically expressed in Black Nationalist ideology, Gilroy also warns against the anti-essentialist position which has assumed hegemony in liberal discourse. This perspective correctly views ‘race’ as a social-cultural construction rather than a purified essence, and emphasizes the internal differentiation of Black cultures. However, its “arrogant deconstruction of blackness” often serves to avoid issues of class and power and ignore the undiminished power of racism. (ibid.) Gilroy’s anti-anti-essentialism goes beyond these two perspectives, and views Black identity neither as a fixed essence nor simply as a symbolic construction. Rather, Black identity is lived as a coherent experience of self, and racialized subjectivity may be better understood as “the product of social practices that supposedly derive from it.” A focus on the personal dimension allows us to go beyond the rather fruitless debate between an essentializing Black Nationalism and an equally ideological colorblind perspective which denies the significance of ‘race’ as a social category.

Race or integrity?

Let us now look at an internal Black debate on the primacy of race or integrity. In the following reasoning, Kelani promotes Black Nationalism, while Ayinde emphasizes personal integrity.
Ayinde: The underlying reason for addressing racial issues is to discern the character of people. ... This facilitates forging alliances with people who are committed to stamping out racism and its effects. ... Some will choose to focus on helping Black people or white people and some can deal with racism within a broader social network.

I deal with people on the basis of their character first. ... A person’s willingness to learn and adjust is far more important than how much they actually know, and this takes precedence over racial considerations. It will take integrity to defeat not only racism but also all other forms of negative discrimination.

Kelani: Judging whites ... individually based on character and intention will never eradicate racial discrimination towards Africans. ... Concerning Black on Black hate we must understand that too many Africans are still mentally enslaved. ... They are ... not really to be blamed for their ignorance when their Eurocentric education have been devoid of anything positive about Africa and Africans. ... I plead all Africans to embrace Pan-Africanism, and start loving one another. Let us slash the white supremacy away and build a better future!

Ayinde: I also know many ‘informed’ Africans who ... think that any view that is different to their own, however legitimate, is an enemy to our struggle. ... Africans must develop a level of integrity in order to accept responsibility for their personal conduct. Without integrity, people just repeat these words but will not be moved to action.

Black first, as a call to move away from superiority and inferiority complexes, to realize our human origins with our natural values and to recognize all the rights of Black Africans, is a Universal call that ... have stimulated all manner of people to ... Rasta. ... This does not mean that we have to work with everyone without discerning and evaluating their conduct ... only work with those who ... have demonstrated commitment not only in words but also in deeds.

I have seen the European greed reach many Africans ... and I have seen many Africans change when introduced to better information and values. So far, I have seen few others make similar moves but when I see their willingness to surrender their privileges ... I will be a fool to reject them.

Kelani: I will proudly claim that I’m an avid Pan-Africanist and dedicated Black Nationalist seeking first to uplift of African people to the natural state of equilibrium, in harmony with nature. ... My allegiance goes first to my race, then to my native country.

Ayinde: This is not possible unless you first reach harmony with your self and by extension all of humanity ... Developing a good relationship with your inner self is a prerequisite to knowing your inner connectedness to all of nature which includes all people. ... All people are receptive to truth in varying levels.

Kelani: All your talk about oneness and self ... does not guarantee anything. The physical life is simply a competition ... in this capitalistic world ... governed by the destructive anti-life behavior of white global supremacy ... Fairness, equality and justice do not balance the scales of this Eurocentric dominated universe. ... My wish is that all Africans focus on Black supremacy ... I ... don’t want us to be left behind.

Ayinde: Suffering only continues for many because they view the world the same way as their oppressors ... play by their bogus rules and definitions ... Eurocentric false values ... Individuals can free themselves from this so they can comfortably engage the process to facilitate change on a global level ... motivate many others to change and that is how change spreads ... by example as we interact with each other and act on realized truths.

One month later...

Kelani: I took the time to think about them from a new perspective. ... Depression, pain, suffering, and pride destroy the love we should have for one another ... as each of us mistakenly assume that the physical world and bad things are the only reality, the ultimate truth. ... Without a cosmic consciousness ... we ... inevitably hurt ourselves ... continuing confrontation without resolving our own trauma and emotions.
Ayinde points out that personally, he associates with people on the basis of their character rather than their skin color, echoing Martin Luther King’s famous statement. He points out that racial identity is subordinated personal integrity, and that the reason for reasoning on racial issues is to discern people’s character. He relates this to a theory of effective resistance against racism, based on interracial networks of people with a personal commitment against racism. Personal integrity implies that people are not only opposed to racism in theory, but that this commitment is reflected in their personal conduct. Kelani is skeptical of the idea to cooperate with any white person. Ayinde points out that also Africans need to take responsibility for their personal conduct. Many political activists for African liberation still act according to Western capitalist values rather than on the African spiritual values they promote. Ayinde emphasizes that people should be evaluated by their integrity rather than their ‘race.’ Blacks are not automatically “good” and whites “bad,” and both have to develop their values and integrity. He points out that if Kelani wants to restore African spiritual values, she needs to be in harmony with her self and all human beings. She does not feel this is relevant in a material world governed by competition, and Ayinde suggests that she can free herself from seeing the world in the same way as her oppressors. One month later, she writes again after having given the matter some more thought. She now acknowledges that she had disregarded spiritual values, and accepted the Eurocentric logic of competition.

**The personal dimension**

Rastafari departs from purely political movements in its primary emphasis on personal development rather than seizing political power. Rastafari seeks to change the values that people act upon, away from competition, dominance and power and towards moral integrity, empathy and solidarity. Various forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism and capitalism, are seen as immoral behavior, resulting from a culture that promotes ‘false values’. Ayanna writes,

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This is not just a big nameless, faceless system. It is people with these poor attitudes that create and contribute to it. … We should all accept personal responsibility while challenging the system. … All change
must come from people, from within themselves. That is why we always begin with examining attitudes and doing the necessary work to refine characters and not go blowing up multi million dollar corporations.

That is in itself why so many revolutions fail. People hardly ever stop to look at themselves while correctly blaming “the system.” It is comfortable I suppose to blame others, and to blame nameless faceless entities; much more so than the hell of realizing that the essence of the system stares right back at you from the mirror.

Ayanna points out here that social structures are reproduced through individual actions. While oppression is systemic, it is also enacted in personal interaction. Consequently, the struggle for social justice starts with moral responsibility on a personal level.

Like a number of other ‘new’ social movements, Rastafari rejects the modern separation of politics and ethics. (Gilroy 1993) Rather than viewing the political as a separable domain in the Western rationalist sense, these movements promote a spiritually informed unity of personal ethics and politics. Scott (1990) writes that Black movements typically seek change primarily through alternative values and life-styles and secondarily through political action. Personal empowerment aims at achieving individual autonomy from ideological barriers through consciousness-raising. The personal and the political dimensions are linked both empirically, because interpersonal relations are shaped by oppression, and morally, in the demands for political commitment to be translated into behavioral changes. The focus on the personal dimension is an extension of politics rather than a retreat from it. These movements generally share the view that a change in consciousness must precede social change. The primary focus is thus to fight psychological and personal repression, and promote attitude change as a necessary first step for social and political change. Consciousness-raising presents individuals with an opportunity to reconstruct their life histories according to standards and criteria different from those of their primary socialization. Social movement networks re-socialize the individual into different values, but also form group identity, and substitute solidarity for instrumental rationality. (ibid.)

Laurence Cox (1998) writes that social movements often aim at self-development rather than the pursuit of material interests. They reject the instrumental logic of the political system and of
capitalism. Moving away from unreflective life worlds is political and raises questions of power and control, although not necessarily as engagement with institutional politics, but rather as a distancing from ‘normal’ and taken-for-granted assumptions of unreflective life worlds. ‘New’ social movements thus address areas that socialists have tended to neglect, issues of self-realization, individual autonomy, freedom and happiness. (Gilroy 1987) Black social movements criticize the ideology of work and productivism, and their political program is to work less, consume better, and reintegrate culture into everyday life. These movements also have an ethical dimension emphasizing communal solidarity, which signifies a set of values and norms in everyday life: mutuality, co-operation, identification and symbiosis. (ibid.)

**Connecting political ideology and personal behavior**

In our discussion of colorism in the previous chapter, we noted that dark-skinned Blacks also experience discrimination from light-skinned Blacks, who may take part in white privilege by being able to pass for white. In chapter 4, we noted that following a Rasta epistemology which links knowledge to experience, the nuances of racism are most likely to be thoroughly understood by those who experience them. This implies that dark-skinned Blacks are generally more sensitive to subtle forms of racism than light-skinned Blacks who are simultaneously oppressed by whites and oppressors of dark-skinned Blacks. In this regard, Ayinde writes,

> Whites and light-skinned … people are at a material advantage in … this … Eurocentric system, but they have a natural sensitivity disadvantage. This is the gap that light-skinned ones do not perceive. … Others do not get the depth of what we say. We must use the same words, but our understandings are not the same. … I find informed light-skinned ones to be more into symbols than substance; they are more comfortable with language than with meaning.

Light-skinned Blacks who participate in Black liberation movements are faced with a challenge to justify their presence in the movement in a similar way as the ‘white Rastas’ discussed above. Ayinde indicates that their lack of personal experiences at the lowest level of the racial hierarchy limits their awareness of the issues facing dark-skinned Blacks. Further, because of their complicity with racial oppression, they are often uncomfortable discussing the personal
dimension of racism. Like ‘white Rastas’, they tend to compensate for their limited personal experiences and awareness of racism with the use of symbolism.

Let us now further illustrate the significance of the personal dimension by analyzing an internal debate about the role of light-skinned Blacks in Black liberation movements. Oshun Auset is a light-skinned mixed-race American, the daughter of a white woman and a Black man. She identifies as Black and is a political activist in the All African People’s Revolutionary Party (AAPRP). In the following reasoning, she discusses colorism and the position of light-skinned persons in the Black struggle with Ayinde and Ayanna. (The dialogue has been edited and cut down to essential statements for reasons of space and clarity.)

Oshun Auset: Most light-skinned people do not acknowledge and fight against the advantage they receive. I am not one of them. … I often criticize … light-skinned people that are comfortable with modern day “passing.” … I often call them “one-lovers.” … The only thing I feel I can, and should be worrying changing is the systematic racism. … will do much more than … trying to change the mind of individuals.

Ayanna: More often than not, light-skinned ones can be viewed as part of the group that suppresses dark-skinned kinky-hair black voices, by their presence in certain quarters. … The fact that light-skinned ones do not get these points also demonstrates the earlier points made about sensitivity.

Oshun Auset: Why are you insisting I do not get this? … I find it insulting that I am being told, even though I have demonstrated to the contrary by the majority of my posts that I do get it. … I don’t even remember a thread coming up where I had to mention that I was of partial European ancestry… because it is not, and should not be anyone’s focus.

Ayinde: Simply claiming to be the exception to the general conduct of light-skinned people is no proof of being different. … I am of the view that you are overly defensive about this issue of colorism, and that in itself shows you do have things to work on.

Ayanna: There is no reason for this defensiveness, especially if you claim to be different. You have taken points that were made in a general manner and responded as if they were directed at you. … It is one thing to think that you have all the information, to think that you are right in your points and that you do not have these issues, but it is … also about how you, with all these possible privileges, may be seen by the same ones whose cause you are so trying to fight. … There is much humility … in being able to stand back and check yourself.

Oshun Auset: I see I shouldn’t be so free with my personal commentary on this board so it won’t be misconstrued… I will keep most discussions ideological from now on, like I have done in the past. I’m starting to feel like I can’t win for loosing no matter what I say on this thread.

Oshun Auset agrees with the criticism of light-skinned people’s behavior, but claims that it does not apply to her, because she is an exception. She also states that she wants to change the social
structure rather than changing the minds of individuals. When Ayanna points out that light-skinned people usually do not get that political views must be reflected in the personal conduct in order to be anything more than empty rhetoric, Oshun Auset is insulted and gets defensive. She claims that her skin color is irrelevant. Ayinde and Ayanna both point out that while Oshun Auset claims to be being an exception; her defensive reaction shows that the cap fits. This dialogue exemplifies what we discussed in chapter 4, about how conduct in reasoning is used to discern and evaluate character. Ayanna emphasizes that it is not just what you know that counts, but also how you present it. When fighting the cause of less privileged ones, it is especially important to be aware of how one’s conduct is perceived by them. Oshun Auset finally withdraws from an encounter she seems like losing, and decides to avoid further confrontation by keeping it ideological rather than personal. When people get defensive, they often say revealing things. In this case, Oshun Auset reveals that she perceives the reasoning as a competitive debate, and explicitly admits that she is more comfortable with the symbolic level than with the personal dimension. Despite her rhetorical claims of understanding the depth of Black issues, she unwittingly confirms Ayinde’s point about the perception gap.

The above discussion later continues in another reasoning between Ayinde and Oshun Auset.

Oshun Auset: Colorism is entrenched in this global capitalist apologist, white supremacist society. The only thing that will change it is the organization of the masses…

Ayinde: Colorism is also entrenched in people of all colors and nationalities today… … light-skinned people ‘telling’ dark-skinned Blacks to organize. … I would expect them to respect the right of the people most affected by the system to advocate the solution.

Oshun Auset: The comment was directly taken from the AAPRP (All African People’s Revolutionary Party) … I am repeating these words from my ideological training in this organization.

Ayinde: Many White and light-skinned ones do not get black issues … They are often too eager to show that because they can use the words … they are the exception to the general White and light-skinned conduct. If they really got it, they would know that they couldn’t prove that they are different with words.

Oshun Auset: Unfortunately words are all that can be used over the internet. Actions speak louder, but only can be seen when dealing with people in “the real world” not cyberspace. … You came off as rude. … The entire tone of your post (that was in direct criticism of my post) was very angered and negative. … I don’t like the tension that has developed between you and I. … I am really curious as to your personal advice on this … because it needs to be examined and discussed. … I am honestly trying to discuss and battle such things.
Ayinde: When ‘some privileged ones’ are challenged they often use terms like rude, angry and negative to describe the responses of ones who do not accept what they say and do. They often feel they are the best judges on these things. … So of course from your position, I can be considered rude for not accepting your word that you are an exception to the rule.

I see other Whites and Light-skinned ones who have been around these boards for years posting fair pro-African comments, and I am still convinced that they are operating from a position of undeserved privileges and light-skin arrogance. That doesn’t … invalidate all that they post. But in my view, they still do not get it.

Beyond your idea of tensions between you and I, I feel that Colorism is the source of real tension between light-skinned and dark-skinned Blacks, and Colorism should be discussed. This is not personal to just you and I.

Oshun Auset starts this reasoning repeating her ideological position that colorism is systemic and can only be changed through organization. Ayinde replies that colorism also exists on a personal level, indicating that Oshun Auset, a privileged person telling more oppressed ones to organize, is engaging in colorist dominance at this very moment. He suggests that it would be more respectful to let the most affected advocate the solution. Oshun Auset excuses herself with disowning her words; she is simply repeating her party’s ideology. In the discussion of epistemology in chapter 4, we noted that many whites tended to perceive reasoning as simply an exchange of political viewpoints, while Blacks insisted that the messenger is equally relevant as the message. When Ayinde points out that she cannot prove her exceptional status with words, Oshun Auset claims that action cannot be seen on the internet, implying that she expects to be trusted and her word taken at face value. In her view, Ayinde’s refusal to accept her word is rude. She is not comfortable with what she perceives to be ‘tension’ between her and Ayinde, and asks him for personal advice. In the past, many discussions of colorism have become confrontational, and a number of light-skinned people have left the forum rather than acknowledging their personal complicity with colorism. Ayinde emphasizes that the ‘tension’ between them is not a private conflict, but a personal reflection of colorism. He also underlines that there are many others who are quite unaware of how their political statements relate to their personal conduct. That doesn’t invalidate their political statements, but neither does it reflect a deeper understanding of the meaning of these statements.
The two reasonings above show that there is a gap in how issues of racism and colorism are perceived by white and light-skinned people on one hand and dark-skinned Blacks on the other hand. Hooks (2000) reports an encounter with a light-skinned woman who could pass for white, which resembles the above interactions with Oshun Auset. Hooks pointed out to this woman “that the ability to pass for white gave her a perspective on race totally different from that of someone who is dark-skinned and can never pass.” (p. 66) Like Ayanna told Oshun Auset, hooks pointed out to this woman that “any person meeting her with no knowledge of her ethnic background probably assumes that she is white and relates to her accordingly.” (ibid.) Like Oshun Auset and many others on the Reasoning Forum, this woman initially “became quite angry.” (ibid.) Weeks later, however, she contacted hooks to tell her that she had “gained new insights and awareness as a result of [their] encounter, which aided her personal growth.” (ibid.) In chapter 8, we will see further examples of this taking place on the Reasoning Forum, where those who persist in reasoning through the issues despite initial defensiveness, develop an awareness of which types of behavior are offensive to Blacks, and try to adjust their conduct by translating these insights into behavior.

**Leadership and autonomy of struggle**

In the light of the significance of personal experience discussed above, Black movements tend to insists on Black leadership. This can be interpreted in terms of a widespread insistence on autonomy of struggle in various social movements (Scott 1990), as well as the non-negotiable nature of their demands. (Melucci 1980) While Black movements may enter into coalitions with other movements fighting for social justice, they resist to subordinate Black liberation to other goals. This means that they have to protect themselves against the influence of people who do not share the primary goal of Black liberation, by excluding these from leadership positions.

The SELF community is owned and controlled by Blacks, and all moderators of the Reasoning Forum are currently Blacks. Ayinde explains the necessity of Black leadership in Black movements in terms of meritocracy, which means selecting the most suitable person for a
position. The merits which qualify for leadership positions in Black movements are the same as elsewhere; knowledge and experience in the relevant field. In the case of a Black liberation movement, the relevant field is racism. Ayinde explains,

Dark-skinned Blacks who are very sensitive and receptive have … deliberately studied the history and/or they have received very traumatic negative experiences in the system, which allowed their senses to be heightened. These Blacks are usually more sensitive to the movements in the system as well as to the motivations of people. Some can falsely feel that we have special problems instead of realizing that we may have special insights.

People of all races can research and learn about the sufferings of others. … The people with the most experiences of both institutionalized racism and gender prejudices in this White world system … are obviously dark-skinned Black Women. If such people were armed with the historical information, they would have both the information and the direct experiences to speak on all these issues.

This viewpoint reflects a theory of knowledge based on experience, which holds that the worse the experience of oppression, the greater the insights into the system of oppression. (Frankenberg 1993) This is in agreement with Collins (2000), who emphasizes that the primary responsibility for defining one’s own reality lies with the people who live that reality and who actually have those experiences. Others may participate and support but leadership must be in the hands of the most experienced. However, expressing a self-defined standpoint is often difficult because they lack control over the ideological apparatuses of society, such as the media. It is thus important for the SELF to maintain their websites as an alternative Black-controlled media. As Ayanna points out, “Sometimes one must lean completely to the left in order to re-balance the boat.” Reversing the hierarchy by reserving leadership for those most oppressed is thus a dialectical strategy for achieving balance.

The policy of SELF, as expressed by Ayinde, is as follows: “In a Black movement, only really informed/enlightened dark-skinned Black people are best qualified to speak powerfully on the issues of racism and gender discrimination.” In the light of the above discussions, it seems clear that there are subtle nuances of racism that are hardly knowable by anyone not having that experience. However, the principles of reasoning also require participants to be prepared to re-evaluate their positions when new evidence is presented. Ayinde acknowledges that,
Many Blacks also are not as sensitive because of their ignorance of the system, and of history in general. Many are unable to properly articulate their experiences. … Since this English language was not developed to express the feelings of Blacks in general, and to an even greater degree the feelings of more sensitive darker-skinned Blacks, we are left to continually looking for better ways to express ourselves.

Generally in the Rastafari movement, positions of leadership are based on a person’s reputation and on his facility with words. Rasta leaders are thus often those who have shown in reasoning that they have a well-developed ability to interpret historical and contemporary events from a Rasta perspective, so that they may act as spokespersons for the community. (Edmonds 1998b)

In the following comment, Ayanna acknowledges that although she is a dark-skinned Black woman, she cannot speak with authority on all issues,

As a black woman coming from a background of relative privilege and false ideas of class superiority, I cannot speak for, or lead a black or light-skinned person from a background of poverty, persecution and intense racial discrimination. I neither have the experience or moral authority to do so.

Ayanna emphasizes that more privileged people neither have the experience nor the moral authority to lead or speak for more oppressed groups. She also acknowledges that her own background of economic privilege disqualifies her from speaking for those whose experiences of poverty and oppression are worse than her own. Her statement thus recognizes that race and gender oppression is intersected by class, differentiating the experiences of individual persons. (hooks 2000) Ayinde summarizes the socio-political dimension, where Rastafari is a Black liberation movement,

The material side is supposed to be about bringing relief to those most affected by the false white supremacist system and as such the focus should be on supporting Africans who are making the effort to help themselves. The key word is support and not lead. … Only people with shared experiences can start a movement and those who continue to share those experiences can lead the movement with any measure of credibility.

He emphasizes the same point as Ayanna above, but adds that white people may support Black liberation. Let us conclude this chapter by looking at what Rastas suggest as a legitimate role for whites in the struggle against racism.
A role for whites in the Black liberation struggle

For white people who want to support Black liberation, Benjamin suggests that their best contribution is to raise consciousness among whites. He writes,

Use your awareness and privilege to affect change. … Rasta is calling on White people to have a 360 [degree] change in their minds. … Perceive the world as comprising one world encompassing everyone and truly work towards restoring balance (equality).

As we have discussed throughout this chapter, the personal dimension is central to the struggle for Black liberation. With their focus on personal change, both Black social movements and the Women’s liberation movement seek to enlist the privileged in their struggle. Rather than regarding whites and men as their enemies to be defeated, they are encouraged to change their dominating ways. In the case of Rastafari, the focus on personal change implies that Blacks, whites and all shades in between may “unlearn white superiority.” Below, Ayinde explains how the socio-political dimension of Rastafari as a Black liberation struggle, is linked to personal empowerment in the spiritual dimension, which is open to all people. He addresses the issue of Black Nationalist rhetoric, which puts many ‘white Rastas’ on the defensive. He writes,

I tolerate some of the extreme rhetoric of some Blacks because it is born out of a type of reality in which they live. Many whites do not understand this reality and without understanding this they unconsciously strive to protect the status quo that permits them to continue feeling privileged although they are also suffering in the same system.

They want material and status benefits from their white ancestry but they don’t want to accept the responsibility for what their direct ancestors did. … It does not mean that people who don’t see all these things are bad people. It simply means they have work to do to lift themselves through the many layers of illusions.

Rasta can offer this to whites. … It is certainly not easy for a white person to come to a Black institution to look for help. Their whole world is tugging them away from this. But truth is a powerful attraction to people who know they are victims of a system although they benefit from its privileges. So I am not dismayed that whites are drawn to African institutions, as addressing issues from an African point of view can bring relief to all people.

Ayinde emphasizes that he tolerates aggressive Black rhetoric because it is a legitimate reaction to a social reality of oppression, a reality which many whites are either unaware of or deny the existence of. Instead of fighting for political power and defeating white persons in the process,
Rastafari recognizes the personal suffering of whites behind their masks of superiority. Rasta encourages white persons to accept responsibility and give up their undeserved power and privileges. Ayinde emphasizes that addressing issues from an African perspective can be of use for whites.

In the next chapter, we will address the conduct of whites on the Reasoning Forum, as it is seen from a Black point of view. I will analyze various forms of “everyday racism” (Essed 1991) on the basis of how these are experienced, evaluated and confronted by Blacks. In chapter 8, we will analyze some examples of whites on the forum trying to translate their awareness of everyday racism into changing those aspects of their behavior that offend Blacks.
Nothing is more consistent, among us, than racist humanism.

Jean Paul Sartre (2001:151)

The white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen.

Jean Paul Sartre (Quoted in Young 2001: xiii)

In this chapter, I will analyze the interaction between whites and Blacks on the Reasoning Forum, with a focus on the various types of white behavior which are identified as offensive and disrespectful to Blacks. On the Reasoning Forum, Blacks as well as whites who have become familiar with Black perspectives, regularly point out and confront these types of behavior. In his analysis of “everyday racism”, van Dijk points out that these practices are often unintentional and subtle, and may be “interpreted as racist practices when minority group members [e.g. Blacks], on the basis of their generalized knowledge about racism, interpret them as such, and when no other reasonable explanation or excuse can be given for such negative actions.” (1993:25)

Forms of everyday racism

Philomena Essed points out that while “some experiences are obvious indications of racism, many others are concealed and subtle. Their understanding requires a certain degree of general knowledge of racism.” (1991:146) A number of people on the Reasoning Forum have this kind of general knowledge of racism, which “programs the understanding of and reaction to personal experiences of racism in everyday life.” (ibid. p. 105) Experiences of everyday racism are thus simultaneously individual and collective. White people on the Reasoning Forum frequently show
dominating behavior towards Blacks, and this can be observed in the discussions. Whites are influenced by Eurocentric culture, and socialized into what Bonilla-Silva (2003) calls a “white habitus.” The habitual behavior of whites is thus not the result of conscious choice, but is rather the “natural” consequence of a white socialization process. To a large extent, structural racism is reproduced unintentionally and unconsciously by the almost automatic actions of individuals, guided by internalized ideas of white superiority. Therefore, we need to define racism by its collective consequences rather than by the intentions of well-meaning white individuals. Whites tend to focus on the perpetrator’s intentions as the primary criterion for determining if an act is racist or not. As racism today is mostly unacknowledged, and often unintended, it is more appropriate to judge an act by its consequences. Thus, if we are to acknowledge Black experiences of racism, we sometimes need to declare that race matters for people who claim it does not. (Lewis 2003)

The forms of everyday racism are not necessarily racist per se. Rather; they represent various forms of dominating strategies that can be defined as racist if used by white individuals against Blacks in social interaction, thus reproducing a structure of group dominance. Similar dominating strategies have been identified by feminists (Ås 1981) to be used by men towards women. According to Essed (1991:49-53), everyday racism is the integration of racism into everyday situations through cognitive and behavioral practices that activate underlying power relations. Through this process, everyday racism becomes part of the expected, unquestionable, and normal practices of the dominant group. These practices are grouped in three categories; marginalization, problematization and containment. (ibid. p. 180-181) Since the Reasoning Forum is controlled by assertive Blacks, only some strategies of marginalization (i.e. cognitive detachment and Eurocentrism) and problematization (i.e. denigration of perspective by attributing oversensitivity) apply here. However, most strategies of containment are relevant for an analysis of interaction on the forum. These include denial of racism (refusal to admit racism, anger against Blacks who point it out, overfriendliness, claiming to mean well, self-pity, and acknowledging only extreme racism), pacification (patronizing, expecting gratitude, and giving charity), intimidation (rudeness, name calling and authoritarian behavior), and retaliation (opposing assertiveness).
On the Reasoning Forum, what Essed calls forms of everyday racism, is seen as a reflection of a ‘white superiority complex’. From a Black point of view certain characteristics stand out as typical white attitudes and behavior. Ayinde writes,

Most Africans and other non-Whites feel that Whites deal with them with a superiority complex. … Although Whites disagree on many things like all other people, this one ‘character flaw’ underlines their general conduct towards Blacks and all others who are considered non-Whites.

Being unaware of how their behavior is perceived by Blacks, many whites protest against these generalizations. Ayinde responds,

If someone says Whites are this way or that way, the person is accused of generalizations. People should know that a generalization only speaks about the majority and not all of a given group. It also speaks about the majority in the awareness of an individual. It is a means of simplifying a discussion. It should only be frowned upon if it is not true for the majority.

According to Ruth Frankenberg (1993), one reason for the protests against collective descriptions about whites, is that whites are used to see themselves as individuals, and have a tendency not to recognize their common specificities as whites, resulting from their privileged position in the world. These commonalities are easier to recognize for those who are not white. However, not all whites have the same access to power and privileges, so that the degree of white dominance will depend on other factors such as gender and class. Frankenberg (1994) urges us to go beyond a dualistic conceptualization of racists versus non-racists, and rather look at degrees of complicity with racism. Such a perspective allows for the appreciation of the process of “unlearning” racism.

**Ignorance and denial of racism**

As we noted earlier, most whites are unaware that they receive unearned racial privileges. These unacknowledged privileges make everyday life easier for whites, and their material consequences contribute to white Americans living on average six to seven years longer than Black Americans. (McKinney and Feagin 2003) On the Reasoning Forum, Tracey writes,
[I] had rather totally taken for granted many of the privileges I had, to float freely through society as I pleased without a thought or care as to who might be waiting in the wings to harass me… or question me… or give me some negative comment, or disdainful look, based solely upon the color of my skin.

Karyn McKinney and Joe Feagin (2003) write that ignorance of history prevents many whites from acknowledging their social and economic privileges. Instead, they tend to take for granted that the current white-dominated system is fair. Most whites assume that racial inequality was fully dealt with in the 1960s, with the implication that white privilege can be defined as a thing of the past. (Gallagher 2003) This belief that racism existed only in the past, enables whites to “feel picked on, victimized, and made to feel guilty” when issues of racial inequality are raised. (Doane 2003) A number of whites get defensive when Blacks or other whites point out racism, and because they are used to view themselves as individuals rather than as part of a social group, they often feel personally indicted and become defensive. (McKinney and Feagin 2003) While some whites do become defensive on behalf of white culture, many distance themselves from whites as a group and claim to be an exception, like Natty Fred on the Reasoning Forum,

I grew up in Afrika (Botswana) and I am a practicing Rastafarian. … I, my mother/father and ancestors have never had any positive involvement with this wicked Babylon System. … Why … does the narrow-minded Afrikan Rasta still see I as a downpressor, and put the burden of responsibility and guilt unmovable on my shoulders?

While this white man seems to believe that he is not in any way involved with imperialism and racism, Oshun Auset reminds him that growing up as an Englishman in Africa is inevitably linked to colonialism. Tracey comments on how white Americans typically approach discussions of racism,

My observations has been that for whites… the history of slavery is such an ugly hideous event in the history of the Americas… that it is disassociated with as much as possible… swept under the rug… looked over… with an uncomfortable “let’s not talk about this” mentality.

Because racism is an uncomfortable topic for whites, it is often avoided, ignored or denied. According to Mills, there are “characteristic patterns of not-seeing and not-knowing – structured white ignorance, motivated inattention, self-deception, and moral rationalization.” (2003:45-46)
On the Reasoning Forum, white and light-skinned people often tend to avoid discussions of racism. In some cases, they explicitly try to distract and change the agenda. Denial and avoidance of race issues are effective political strategies for justifying the persistence of white hegemony and marginalizing political claims of Blacks. (Doane 2003) A characteristic of “new racism” is that explicitly racist viewpoints are denied while implicitly similar positions persist. Typical statements that deny the significance of race include well-known and often-heard phrases such as “I’m not a racist, but…” and “I am colorblind.” (Myers 2003) Kelani insists on discussing race and criticizes white people’s denial,

Whites living in denial regarding what really ails the majority of Black men and women in this world … they … avoid facing their historical dealings with Blacks and how they … benefit from Black oppression. … trying to MINIMIZE the Black reality … spread their ignorant, arrogant and paternalistic eurocentricity

Some whites cite that they have Black friends as evidence for not being racist. The practice of having a symbolic Black friend as evidence of anti-racism is called tokenism. In order to meet a requirement to include Blacks, and avoid accusations of racism, American movies, TV series and pop groups may feature one Black person in the midst of whites, and tokenism has become widespread also in people’s personal lives. Tracey writes on the Reasoning Forum,

Many whites feel that if they have a “token” one or two black friends… that means they are not a racist… but I have observed that many of these token black friends had many white similarities/characteristics, and the cultural divide IS still quite an expansive gap.

Tracey points out that these token “Black friends” may accept interaction on white terms rather than challenge white perceptions about Blacks. According to Eileen O’Brien (2003), a token Black friend may often be an acquaintance rather than a close friend, and she may not feel comfortable talking about racial matters with her white “friend.”

**Claiming “reverse” racism**

In the following exchange with Kelani, Mandingo appears to be unaware of structural racism, and this lack of awareness enables him to complain about “reverse discrimination” and “reverse
The discussion also illustrates some white people’s persistent denial and refusal to understand the historical and structural aspects of racism even after it is repeatedly pointed out.

Mandingo: I feel you are a person full of prejudice, and I don’t see a difference between your prejudice and white people’s one. … Life is an absolute relativity.

Kelani: I admit that I am a Nationalist thinker. What is it that you think it entails racism, discrimination?

Whatever beef I have with Caucasian people has to do with all that has happen to us from the miseducation, the lynching, killings, the imprisonments, the rapes and the way racism has been institutionalized in politics, government and economics in the world.

Don’t accuse me of being racist, I cannot systematically charge you or your people higher interest rates, premiums … make covert pacts to keep you from safe affordable housing … lobby to have your jobs, colleges, or contract opportunities taken away from you …

Mandingo: I know it is important to reason about race and gender discrimination, to go beyond it and teach about equal rights and respect for differences. … What about “Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior”?

Kelani: Always when we Black people think against the white man or his own will, we are charged with being racist or anti-white. However, the historical record demonstrates clearly that racism or anti-Black has been the primary method by which your ethnic group (white or brown whatever you call it) has achieved and maintained power.

Mandingo: I didn’t really get it. … Still difficult to me.

I don’t think I have to act like other racist people just because of the color of my skin. … I have no intention of telling people what to do or to miseducate people. … Why would anyone follow what I say unless one agrees with it?

In his opening line, Mandingo states a relativist position, where he sees Black and white views about each other as equally prejudiced. This indicates that he shares a “colorblind” perspective on race relations, which assumes actual equality between white and Black, and defines racism as color prejudice by individuals of any race. Kelani explains that her generalization of whites is based on historical facts, and that “reverse racism” simply cannot exist as long as whites are in power. Her view implies a definition of racism as a structural relation of dominance. When Mandingo quotes Haile Selassie to demand equal rights for whites, Kelani points out that he is blaming the victim. Mandingo emphasizes his good intentions, and is unaware of how he is perceived by Blacks.
Robert Chambers (1998) points out that the privileged tend to prefer explanations which require the oppressed to change rather than to change themselves. Blaming the victim is a much-used strategy which serves to avoid responsibility, and ignores both the historical context and the power structure. (Ås 1981) Numerous whites on the Reasoning Forum quote Haile Selassie when they feel discriminated against by Blacks. Nattydread, a 15-year-old boy from Grantham, England, writes,

> On the reasoning boards I see a lot of should we accept white Rastas and do they feel the same as us black Rasta. The question is if you follow Haile Selassie I then you would [k]no[w] that the colour of a man’s skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes.

Both Mandingo’s and Nattydread’s quotes of Haile Selassie I are taken from Bob Marley’s song “War,” whose lyrics are taken from a speech by the Ethiopian Emperor. The song goes as follows,

> Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior, is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war […]
> Until the colour of a man’s skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes […]
> Until that day, the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship, rule of international morality, will remain in but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, but never attained. […]
> Until that day, the African continent will not know peace, we Africans will fight, we find it necessary and we know we shall win as we are confident in the victory of good over evil.

It has become a habit for some whites to quote the words of Haile Selassie or Martin Luther King Jr. as “advice” to Blacks, as if Blacks need to be reminded of them. When a white person tells a Black one what is best for him, implying that the white one knows better, this is usually taken as patronizing and as a reflection of an assumption of white superiority, especially when the advice is evidently in the interest of the white person rather than the Black one. In a similar situation, Nattydread writes,

> Should we see people by the character or by the skin? … To me character is the obvious one, but to you I’m not sure. … I’m not … prejudice to anyone … I see people as equals.

Nattydread is here quoting Martin Luther King’s plea that “individuals should not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” The “colorblind” ideology enables
whites to interpret King’s statement to mean that Blacks are racist when they continue to argue that skin color remains a significant factor in allocating resources. (Gallagher 2003)

**Claiming oppression**

Sometimes ‘white Rastas’ are ridiculed by other whites for taking on the symbolism of Rastafari. Some of them claim that this “light form of harassment” equals the oppression from whites that Black people face. Nattydread writes,

> Everyday at school I get sh*t from non Rastas who are also white who continually take the p**s quoting from Cool Runnings: “easy Rasta” and other stuff like Rasta just ganja smoking hippies who just want an excuse when they get caught by the police. … All the teachers wait till I am near, then they say to other students: Does he believe in Haile Selassie or is he in it for the ganja? … The oppression they give me hurts so much more than physical pain could.

Muata replies that his “claim to oppression” is offensive to Blacks because it minimizes the Black experience of racism. He comments, “If you don’t want to offend, don’t ever compare your petty little problems in school based on image and style with I Blackman’s struggle.” For many whites, the Black insistence on discussing past and present injustices inflicted on them by white people, feels uncomfortable. Whites then accuse Blacks of overcompensating and putting their suffering above others. (O’Brien 2003) Some whites claim oppression on the basis of their ethnic identity. Natty Fred does this in the following,

> I am white … My mother's family comes from Israel, and my father's family is English, from a poor peasant background. … The Jews have been persecuted and oppressed since long, long time now. And the English peasants were oppressed by the wicked Monarchy … Not only Afrikans … have suffered under this Babylon System.

Although it is true that the Jews have been persecuted and English peasants oppressed, as a white man Natty Fred also receives privileges at the expense of Blacks. Gman, a Guyanese man of mixed parentage, indicates that these arguments are common on the Reasoning Forum when he comments, “Another white Rasta bitching and moaning about how they're getting persecuted.”
Also people of mixed race use this argument to minimize the oppression of Blacks under racism. Elena, a 26-year-old biracial woman from Toronto, Canada, uses arguments similar to whites,

I am biracial. … My mother is from Trinidad and my father is Greek. My ancestors on both sides have gone through slavery, genocide, land was taken from them, women were raped. … The trial and tribulations were the same – poverty, survival. Both sides have gone through it.

Muata, who is also of mixed parentage but identifies as Black, is offended, and replies,

To compare Greek, so-called stolen culture, to I&I African struggle is a abomination, sista stop the ignorance, please study the realstory before you come with such absurd statements!

Ashley Woody Doane (2003) identifies this as a strategy to deflect attention from current white privileges, and explains that the colorblind ideology enables whites to “play the white ethnic card” and claim that their ancestors also experienced oppression.

Entitlement and arrogance

‘White Rastas’ invoke a number of arguments in order to claim a place in Rastafari they feel entitled to. Some whites apparently feel excluded from Black activities (Myers 2003), and feel it is unfair that Blacks can organize racially but whites cannot. This argument ignores the fact that most social institutions already privilege whites. (Gallagher 2003) The assumption and expectation that wherever one goes, one will not only be tolerated, but also accepted and trusted, is a reflection of white privilege. Many white people approach Black groups such as Rastafari with this sense of entitlement, and if they are not welcomed with open arms, they often demand to be. Natty Fred feels that he has a right to be part of Rastafari, and that he can legitimately demand to be accepted. He writes,

You are only working against yourselves in this struggle, if you deny a white Rasta acceptance. Who are you to deny me my culture? I am African even though my skin is white. Give everyone a chance! … True (white) Rastas deserve acceptance the same as Black Rastas.
Some light-skinned Blacks share this sense of entitlement derived from white privilege. Tico, a light-skinned man from the Bahamas, tells us about how he felt entitled to film people without asking permission at the International Rastafari Reasoning at the UWI Mona Campus in Kingston, Jamaica. He writes,

> Since these people were all darker than me, I guess I should have … asked them first? I also did lots of filming in Jamaica, I captured many scenes of random people walking, pulling up in cars … I didn’t ask them first either … I was in a public place, the University of the WEST INDIES, as a WEST INDIAN whose government subsidizes the existence of the campus. … I have as much right to be on the campus as anyone else. … I am humbly sorry that I with my light skin and bald head dared enter a Rastafari academic gathering. I should not have expected to find intelligent persons capable of judging me as an individual.

Tico asserts his privilege in front of people that are less privileged than him, and they find that arrogant and offensive. One aspect of white privilege is to expect to be welcomed with open arms wherever they go, another aspect is his expectation to be judged as an individual. (O’Brien 2003)

Let us illustrate “white arrogance” with another quote from Natty Fred, who writes,

> My whole point is that the enslavement of Afrikans does not give Afrikans in the present day the right to have prejudice for every white man. Judge by a man’s actions, not by his skin colour! … Remember Selassie I’s teachings of unity, not only black unity but unity of the human race. … Has slavery forced you to block that out of your mind? … Remember, it's a Rasta revolution, not just a black one! Don't put this Holy movement into skin colour categories! Wise up and rise up, together as one!

Natty Fred seems to believe that he can tell Blacks how they should relate towards him, despite the history of racism. If a white speaker issues a request or a command to a Black person, and his only basis for authority is an assumption of white superiority, his authority is illegitimate and the request or command can be seen as arrogance, following Ayinde’s definition of arrogant conduct,

> When people act without legitimate authority, are not well informed and experienced in the subjects they take on, and are persistent in such delusions, their conduct is often arrogance. … If someone is acting with … legitimate confidence … based on being informed and experienced in the area they cover … and with legitimate authority … such conduct cannot be arrogance.

Rootsie relates arrogance to the white superiority complex,

> Individual arrogance arise from collective white supremacy and … privilege … Centuries of domination by your people over others gives rise to ‘Chosen People’ assumptions. … Most whites of course do not freely
admit this, especially to themselves. But unless they are willing to do the work and examine their assumptions, this superiority complex speaks through their actions.

In the excerpt below, Rootka, who claims to be a Rastaman born and raised in the Caribbean, seems to be tired of discussing racism.

Rootka: I … just can’t get caught up with all this talk on Black & White; it’s ridiculous to me. Not necessary in Rastafari, we are supposed to be teaching the people not tearing them down with all this prejudice talk. His Majesty taught us African Unity, but also Universal Unity, and that is what I must accept always. Selassie I.

Ayanna: Whites and light-skinned blacks DECIDING WHAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED AND WHAT IS IRRELEVANT. That attitude is not only arrogance and superiority but borders on downright racism. NO ONE can tell black people what their issues are or what should be focusing on.

Rootka is reluctant to discuss racism, ridicules the idea that skin color matters, and attempts to decide what is relevant to discuss. Ayanna points out to him that when light-skinned persons try to decide what is irrelevant on a Black discussion forum, this is both arrogant and racist.

**Paternalism**

On the Reasoning Forum, Mandingo, the white Brazilian man, suggests that he can “help” Blacks to overcome their inferiority complex. In the following exchange, he reasons with IanI.

Mandingo: White people like me … can help [Black] people transcend their inferiority complex by showing them how this exists and must be corrected and transcended. … A black colleague was saying to me how I had a GOOD hair and his hair was BAD hair. … I said … you should love yourself more, uplift your mind and perception.

IanI: If you de considered “white”, is truly not up to you to “show” a black one how to overcome inferiority complex due to the skin colour. This is … patronization … you may feel that you only want to “help” … yet … the attitude that you de “know more” and can help Blackman from his pit of ignorance and inferiority is ingrained in you psyche.

Mandingo: I guess I didn’t express myself clearly in the last post. … Give thanks for pointing this interpretation, but made me feel I had passed a wrong interpretation of my feelings. … If you think I’m still blind to see what you so kindly want to show me, please try it again and sorry if I pass the impression that I’m feeling difficulty to overstand this matter.

IanI: I am sure that you “feelings” towards you friend there is quite honest. Your intentions are from the Heart. BUT … Many white ones … think they are doing the right thing when they try and “correct” their black bredren… however, “correcting” the black ones “inferiority complex” is not up to you and is mostly taken as insult…
Mandingo seems unaware that his white skin color has a social significance when interacting with Blacks. IanI points out that he needs to be constantly aware of approaching Blacks in a respectful manner; otherwise he may slip back into the ‘white habitus’ of patronizing Blacks.

While Mandingo just wants to help, other whites have a more explicit desire to teach other cultures about democracy and freedom, and go off on “liberating missions.” Jeff, a white American, tells us about some white feminists who desire to liberate Black women. He writes,

> I have heard some white Rasta sisters say that they want to go “liberate the sisters” in the [Jamaican] Rasta scene, and I can only smile and think about how they need to go and LEARN. This all stems from the whole colonialist mentality, the “white man’s burden” of “civilizing the underdeveloped savages.”

Ayanna describes how she is offended by white tourists visiting Trinidad. She writes,

> As someone from the Caribbean I have had the experience of whites or light skinned foreigners acting as though my country is a quaint little theatre where they can just take pictures and then comment when they return to the ‘real world’ on the lovely time they had with the natives, an attitude which I personally find very insulting.

The white people described above were unaware of the fact that their behavior was patronizing and offensive to Blacks. This unconscious paternalism often appears to whites to be respectful conduct, while it is actually insulting and offensive to Blacks. (Vera and Gordon 2003) Richard Delgado writes that white people with good intentions may reproduce racism without realizing it. He introduces the concept of ‘false empathy’, which refers to a white person’s assumption that Blacks want or need the same as whites even though their experiences are different, and this behavior will come across as patronizing. (O’Brien 2003) Whites often believe that Blacks want to be white, and men believe that women want to be men. (Ås 1981) This is another reflection of the superiority complex that privileged people tend to assume that everybody else is envious of their privileges.
The “white savior complex” represents another form of white paternalism. Ani (1994) identifies the self-image as “world savior” as a characteristic of white or European culture. While often claimed to be altruistic, it implies European superiority. White missionaries may be Christians, development workers or peacemakers. Natty Fred on the Reasoning Forum is a humanitarian missionary. He states,

It is a mission of mine to help shorten the divide between black and white. … I am involved in 2 anti-racism campaigning groups in … England. I have worked in Malawi as a teacher, building schools and educating youth about child rights/human rights and HIV/AIDS prevention. … If I cannot be accepted as a brother in the black community … my mission becomes … much harder.

Emmanuel, a Black Jamaican, comments that it seems Natty Fred wants “to collect reward for deeds done”, that he is expecting gratitude from Blacks for his antiracist activities. On this basis, he demands to be accepted in the Black community. Some white antiracists believe that while they are trying to act in opposition to racism, Blacks are the real problem when they are resistant to whites’ efforts. (McKinney and Feagin 2003) From a Black perspective, whites telling Blacks how to deal with racism represents a manifestation of white supremacy. (O’Brien 2003) Noah, a Black American activist, responds to Natty Fred with a general comment about white anti-racists,

Whites with consciousness about their peoples’ history tend to focus more of their efforts on changing the image of whites among blacks, than they focus on trying to change the whites and the effects from white history that gave white the bad reputation.

Noah indicates that whites are often more concerned with improving their image instead of improving their actual behavior. In this regard, Ani (1994) has written that while whites profess to be following “Christian values”, they generally display behavior patterns that are in direct contradiction to these values. She calls this phenomenon, typical of Western capitalist culture, the rhetorical ethic. On the Reasoning Forum, the use of ‘symbols without substance’ among whites is often criticized, indicating a widespread lack of commitment to professed ideals.
Unconscious Racism and consciousness-raising

We have seen that the effects of the “white superiority complex” are largely invisible and unconscious to whites, who are mostly unaware that their attitudes and behavior may unintentionally have racist consequences and reproduce racism. John, a 27-year-old white American, writes on the Reasoning Forum, “As a white person, I can honestly state that if I do approach other races or colors with a superiority complex, it is completely unintentional.” Jeff, another white American, also reflects on the unconscious white superiority complex,

There is a definite syndrome (white/Western/’civilized’ superiority complex) that plagues the human race, mostly white people, but also people of other colors and ethnicities … as western civilization spreads its claws around the globe … Most of the time … they are sub-consciously doing it, it seems so ingrained. I don’t think they mean intentional harm, but it is so part of the psyche that it just happens.

Since the 1960s, when the explicit expression of racist ideas became unacceptable, its articulation has become more subtle. While claiming “colorblindness”, “new racism” maintains white privilege without being openly antagonistic. (Myers 2003) These subtle and allusive forms of everyday racism may be powerful and consequential precisely because they are hard to see. (Essed 1991) Through confrontation with assertive Blacks who point it out, however, whites may become aware of these subtle forms of everyday racism, and change their behavior. This is part of spiritual development in Rastafari, as Tyehimba points out,

An important part of spiritual development that is the authentic path of the Rastafarian is refining character and checking one’s actions, one’s thoughts, one’s words for flaws and having the humility to recognize and to work on them. In this constant process of discernment one must be able to have the humility to accept good advice and to not let the ego get in the way of learning.

Ayinde emphasizes the importance of integrity and character in relation to racism,

The underlying reason for addressing racial issues is to discern the character of people. … Character … can be discerned through reasoning and the observation of conduct. … We measure character by first developing our own and by observing the words and actions of others. If people claim to understand something, then their actions must reflect this.
Ayinde points out that people’s character can be discerned in reasoning, and that this is the underlying reason for discussing racism. Everyday racism is understood as a kind of immoral behavior, which can be observed in reasoning. Awareness of these behavior patterns is then expected to be translated into action. This is referred to as “character development” and reflects the Rasta epistemology which seeks to bring knowledge and action into alignment. Tracey emphasizes the importance of humility in this process of spiritual development,

Humility is a very important quality to have and is good to know when to exercise it. When a truth reveals itself personally … one must grasp it for what it is … and resist the temptation to tell others what they “need to work on.” … I do not believe it is for any of us to tell another what they “needs do” … as it is one’s own personal spiritual journey to work out whatever truth reveals itself at any given point in time. … One must be accountable to one’s Self, first.

When people have grasped something for themselves, they often try to impose their own understanding on others. Tracey speaks from personal experience, and has realized that it is not about knowing the “correct answers”, but about how we relate to one another.

We have in this chapter analyzed various forms of “everyday racism” as they have been pointed out on the Reasoning Forum. Let us now sum up these examples in light of the analytical framework developed by Essed (1991), and insights drawn from Whiteness Studies (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003). “Ignorance of racism” may be interpreted as a result of cognitive detachment and Eurocentrism. This lack of awareness of structural racism enables whites on the forum to make claims of “reverse racism” and “equal oppression” – corresponding to “victim-blaming” and “self-pity” in Essed’s terminology. “Denial of racism” often takes the form of claiming good intentions and expressing anger at Blacks who point out racism. What is pointed out as “arrogance” on the forum corresponds to Essed’s strategies of intimidation, such as authoritarian behavior and rudeness. These behavior patterns are associated with a sense of entitlement, which derives from a social position of privilege, where one is used to getting one’s way. Finally, “paternalism” may be seen as a strategy of pacification, through giving charity and expecting gratitude.
From a Rasta perspective, all these behavior patterns are identified as reflections of the “white superiority complex.” Ignorance and denial of racism are seen as reflecting assumptions of superior ‘white’ perspectives and knowledge. “White arrogance” also seems to imply that the opinions, interests and desires of whites are more important and should count for more than those of Blacks. Paternalism implies an assumption that Blacks desire something which whites have and may offer them, either in the form of knowledge, material goods or “help”. Those who show patronizing behavior have usually not taken care to find out what the Black person in question really desires. On the Reasoning Forum, Rastas identify these patterns of ‘white’ attitudes and behavior as reflecting a lack of empathy and respect for Blacks. Van Dijk also points out that the practices that constitute “everyday racism” can be seen as “a breach of the rules, norms, and values underlying appropriate behavior in social interaction.” (1993:25) Rastas seek to fight these forms of immoral behavior by encouraging whites to develop personal integrity, moral responsibility and improve their character. That will be the focus of the next chapter.
In this chapter, we will analyze the process of “unlearning white superiority.” We will look at some examples from the Reasoning Forum where white people have been confronted by assertive Blacks, gained awareness about everyday racism, and translated this awareness into behavior change. I will discuss these empirical examples in the light of perspectives from Whiteness Studies, and discuss some common challenges for white anti-racists. Let us first see what Rootsie, the white woman who runs the affiliated forum on European roots, tells us about her first encounter and subsequent development with Rasta. Her experiences and perspectives seem to apply to many white people who approach Rastafari. Rootsie writes,

I was 19 and first started listening to reggae and learning about Rastafari. … What I did was stick with it and learn and read and listen and grow. … I read Malcolm X talking about the white devil, thinking now what does that have to do with me? … What I know now is that it has everything to do with me … if I don’t make it my life’s work to break this white supremacy.

There are many layers to this white privilege of ours. … No white person can say with authority: I don’t hold any racist attitudes. I’m 46 now, and still things come up and slap me in the face. … One love and global unity are worthy goals, but they are hard work!

The racist system is NOT of the past, and we all suffer with it, and I think our job for our own growth as human beings is to live the kind of life that bears witness to our commitment to One Love. … It means work, and using the privileges we have been given and don’t deserve to work towards the education of other whites.

There is no place in Rasta for whites who do not want to look at some very uncomfortable realities, and translate their understandings into positive action. History is crucial … as little as 60,000 years ago we were ALL African. … We have to question why this history we are taught tells us that Africa holds a minor place in the world.

We cannot become black, but we can live our lives according to African values, which are HUMAN values, and look at what is happening in the world through that lens. … Africans don’t need for us to tell them much things, but we need to reason among ourselves to come to this teaching in the proper respectful way.
Like many other white Rastas, Rootsie came to know about Rastafari through reggae music. She gradually became aware of how ingrained racism is in Western culture, and accepted her responsibility as a white person to fight against it. Based on her own experience and development with Rasta, she now advises other whites who approach Rasta,

The only way possible to get beyond the race issue is through it! … I am a white one who came here and was challenged, and grew, and am most grateful for this. Listening to the lived reality of our Afrikan idrens is a must for whites who sight Rasta. The only way to have reconciliation is through truth-telling on all sides of the race issue. … Looking to the African roots keeps us honest.

Those who feel uncomfortable coming here … should … examine that discomfort: white privilege is a many-tentacled beast, and one of them is the assumption that we should be received with open arms wherever we go, unchallenged. … Those who sight Rastafari must develop the integrity to stand in the face of an ugly historical picture without shrinking back … into platitudes of ‘peace and unity’ and ‘One Love,’ without doing the work in the proper order to manifest One Love.

Rootsie acknowledges what white people can learn from addressing things from a Black perspective in terms of character development in the spiritual dimension of Rastafari. Let us now look at the process of becoming conscious and changing conduct. I will present excerpts from the reasonings illustrating how three white people, Tracey, Iyah and Out of Zion, are challenged, learn and change. As we will see, “unlearning white superiority” is hard work, and people constantly fall back into old habits. However, these people don’t give up.

**Tracey’s development**

Tracey is a white woman who shows a level of understanding and a willingness to learn, but the following examples show that she still occasionally conducts herself in ways that are criticized by Blacks. She is continually discovering new layers of what may be called the white superiority complex, and she shows a willingness to change and adjust her behavior as she gains more awareness of herself and her own conduct. In addition to Tyehimba and Ayinde, the other participants in the following reasoning are Rootswoman, a light-skinned African American woman, Rose, a Black woman, and Christine, a white woman. (The quote from Father James Jah Lightning referred to, is a text by a Black Rasta expressing his love for all of humanity.)
Tracey: We are now being judged on the basis of our skin! ... You seem to dismiss any valid contributions that whites may have to offer to Rasta ... It even seems that you no want any white people hangin around. If I may share a very deep and loving thought from the heart and soul of foriver living giving love of Father James Jah Lightning ...

Rootswoman: No sistah, you are not being judged by the color of your skin. ... Your accusations are rather typical of white Rastas ... accusations of us being too militant, ... angry ... reverse racism ... because we are naturally suspicious of a people who have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt (as a collective) that the destruction of Africans is their priority.

Tyehimba: Whites have difficulties understanding the full extent of white supremacy the same way that males have a hard time understanding the full extent of gender discrimination. ... Until that time comes when people are less ignorant of how white supremacy and gender supremacy benefits them, they will be able to do no better than patronizing attitudes that we all come across in day to day interaction.

Ayinde: It is understandable that some whites who are making an effort want to be seen as different from the rest. ... Making an effort is not equal to change. And no one is obligated to believe someone at his or her word. We would have to wait for a new history of improvement before these attitudes can change. ... Making an effort is part of the journey and not the destination.

Tracey: If it has taken on a patronizing tone I apologize. It is ... not my intention to bump heads with you and yet, pon reflecting deeper I know that I have. ... I am indeed a person willing to check my own attitude and hold it up to the light. ... I hope that you too read the piece about Rastafari and the “Whole World” written by Father James.

Rose: Why do you choose to use Father James as an example of a good African? ... You cannot lean on one African to tell another African how they should be. This is another divide and rule tactic. ... No right-thinking African wants a white person to suggest a role model for them. Don’t you think Africans on this board can make that choice for themselves?

Tracey reposts the text by Father James

Rose: You are now discovering this in an African movement and many before him said that and were suppressed and killed by whites. What makes you feel that Africans don’t know about one love? You seem to want to dictate how all Africans must deal with you. That is why most of us reserve our love for people who truly respect us.

Christine: Lessons learnt ... are often ... forgotten when the need to always be in control or to control others takes precedence over ... one’s own self development. ... Every one new thing learnt in life is ... one more new thing, not everything, and one ought ... not get carried away with the illusion that they know it all. ... True love and compassion for others is to begin first with respect. ... Humility is the beginning of wisdom.

Tracey: Pon deeper reflection... I think part of my kneejerk reaction was ... I wanted to come to you but felt I wouldn’t be received ... that my skin would be the barrier ... but today I see it wasn’t the skin it was my attitude that became the barrier. ... Funny thing how we project our stuff onto others.

Ayinde: Humility is good but groveling is of no use to anyone. It is one’s strength that will serve us all but sometimes the ongoing desire to respond/or put on public shows can reduce one’s self to a pitiful being. It is better sometimes to reflect and leave well alone. Silence is ‘sometimes’ golden. ... If Africans are assertive it does not mean they desire White Slaves.
Tyehimba: When ‘One Love’ becomes a smoke screen to ignore history and to take shortcuts along the journey of self-development … when the ‘one love’ rhetoric upholds the status quo and ignores the injustice and discrimination that Africans face on a day to day basis, it becomes necessary to speak up and shatter the illusions.

I have no doubts that there will be white folks who have good intentions, but that doesn’t make their embedded often unconscious manifestations of White supremacy non existent. As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The interaction begins when Tracey feels that she is not acknowledged in Rasta because she is white, and tries to teach Blacks about ‘one love’ by invoking a Black Rasta as an authority. We have seen that this is typical for many “white Rastas” as Rootswoman points out. Tyehimba points out that Tracey showed a patronizing attitude, which she was not aware of because of her limited understanding of how white supremacy works in daily interaction. Ayinde points out that Tracey cannot expect Blacks to treat her differently simply because she claims to make an effort and be an exception to the general conduct of whites, as only action over time can prove change. Tracey seems to acknowledge the criticism and apologizes, but repeats the patronizing act by requesting the Black participants to read the text on ‘one love.’ Rose explains more explicitly why this behavior is patronizing: Tracey does not respect Black people’s right to choose their own role models. When Tracey repeats the act in defiance, Rose explains further: Tracey’s behavior implies that she assumes that Blacks do not know about ‘one love’ and need her to tell them. Christine describes Tracey’s conduct as arrogant and controlling, and advises her that love begins with respect. Tracey realizes that the problem was not her skin color, but that her attitude reflected assumptions of white superiority. She also realizes that she projected her own skin color prejudice on the Black participants. Ayinde points out to Tracey that she should not keep on groveling and pose as a pitiful being as a means to get the last word. Tyehimba finally points out that declarations of ‘one love’ cannot be used as a short cut for not doing the work of self-development. He emphasizes that even genuine good intentions cannot prevent unconscious assumptions of white superiority to manifest themselves. In this interaction, we saw many of the issues of white superiority that were discussed in chapter 7. While many others reacted with defensive aggression, Tracey was eventually willing to check herself and adjust her behavior upon being made aware of certain character flaws. But even Tracey was defiant and had to learn the hard way, supporting Rootsie’s statement that unlearning white superiority is hard work.
Iyah360’s development

The following reasoning is between Ayinde and Iyah360, a white American man who is critical of the Bush administration and has a sincere interest in the African perspective.

Iyah360: The republicans are excellent strategists. … It is pure genius.

Ayinde: It has always been part of the U.S.’s “excellence” and “pure genius” to PRETEND that they are about free and fair elections, democracy, and human rights. … Bush is the perfect representation of the majority of White Americans who are also IGNORANT and ARROGANT.

The Black and White so-called liberals are the real problem today; they try to come over as if they get the issues but they settle for the same things. The only difference is they prefer the corruption and brutality done in a more clandestine manner. … I don't see any of these corrupt people as intelligent, “excellent strategists”, or manifesting “pure genius”. … It is only excellent when people stand on integrity.

Iyah360: It appears that this is about my use of words then.

Ayinde: I do not feel that if you change your words it can fundamentally change anything. It was very obvious to me that you were unwittingly celebrating White political deception. What I am showing is that even when the White power system is at its worst, Whites can celebrate it. The crap does not impact on them the most (as yet), and they get by, massaging their false superiority complexes.

I am showing that despite your attempted 'critique' of the system, it was quite easy for you, a White person, to attempt to raise the worst tactics used by this blatantly corrupt and dangerous U.S. regime to the status of “pure genius” and “excellent strategists”.

Iyah360: It is true, if I were suffering from the system at its worst, I may very well have not been afforded the privilege to have the point of view I come from. You are correct, I am able to see the tactics of the Bush administration from a distance, in the realm of a theoretical intellectual analysis, rather than direct impact.

I will meditate on this and try to properly assimilate it into my actions. Thanks for opening up my mind some more and showing me the heart of the matter which my privilege creates a blindspot to.

Iyah360 has critically analyzed the Bush administration and describes them as excellent strategists even if he does not think that their policy objectives are excellent. Ayinde replies that Bush’s strategy of deception cannot be described as excellent, because only moral integrity is excellent. He rejects the kind of rational analysis which dominates Eurocentric science, where morality is defined as irrelevant. Iyah360 perceives this to be a criticism of his choice of words, and Ayinde explains that using these words was in fact a celebration of the rationality of white power, enabled by the fact that Iyah360 is privileged and not directly affected by Bush’s policies.
Iyah360 acknowledges that his distance from the impact of Bush’s decisions allows him this theoretical analysis, and that this is part of white privilege. Finally, he says he will “meditate” on the issue and try to assimilate it into his actions.

**Out of Zion’s development**

This example features Out of Zion, a 22 year-old white American man, who is a Jehovah’s Witness, in a discussion with Kelani. He approached the Reasoning Forum in order to learn about Rastafari and engage in theological discussions. He claims that his congregation is a colorblind organization, and that he does not participate in racism, both arguments often used by whites. When the exchange starts, he has just called Kelani a racist for challenging his Christian faith.

**Kelani:** Conscious brethren (Iyah360, Tracey) spend some time discussing racial politics with the majority of whites and see … their … hypocrisy. … They don’t want to hear anything that doesn’t conform to their reality. So when you hit them with facts, they ignore them. … However, I feel this communication has been highly beneficial to the member Out of Zion, he has learned a lot.

**Out of Zion:** Yes … I have learned a lot. … I don’t really understand what is expected from me in the area of “racial politics.” I’m a 22 year old white man who’s got along with blacks, whites, latinos, Asians, whatever, and has never thought much more of the matter. … I think too much is made of the race issue. If you want racism to disappear … stop pressing the issue and allow the process of time to alleviate matters. What more do you expect?

**Tracey:** One of the great things about this board is being able to hold one’s views up to the light and have them examined by many different angles of light. … I observe youthmen try to articulate their budding views. … Many youth are usually full of themselves, and … try to hammer their newly attained viewpoints like a sledge hammer (with authority) without first having the direct experience to know what the heck they’re talking about.

There is so much to learn from those who have come before. … It is vital to know your racial identity and how that has contributed to what is going on in the world today. You cannot disassociate yourself. … History … provides you with a certain responsibility to act from the collective conscious given from what you know and have experienced.

Five months later, Kelani challenges Ryan, a ‘white Rasta’ new to the forum, and Out of Zion comments…

**Out of Zion:** Your ton of bricks approach isn’t too effective. By and by you and others began to teach me, but remember, I was very indolent when I first came here and you got very upset … Have some patience with him! I know the typical white mindset angers you, but when you finally take the time to reason with ones such as Ryan (and indeed I when I arrived), it’s much more effective than telling him to pick up a book! Nonetheless, much love to you [Kelani] Your intentions are always true and heartfelt, even though it may come trough as tough love and anger at times.
Kelani: My way of instructions worked with you. So, I am not going to waste my time feeding back Eurocentric ignorant attitude, for I honestly believe a person who claim to be “Rasta” should know the number one problem today, which is the system of White Supremacy throughout the world. Only cowards feel threatened.

Out of Zion: Well [Kelani] said it all when she said “It worked with you.” I’m not saying “look at me, hail the perfect educated and aware white.” But I didn’t run for the shadows when she called me out on things that I was flat ignorant on. I kept banging my head against the tree until I saw a few things around me.

As we have seen in previous posts by Kelani, she has a rather tough style of confronting people. In this reasoning, she mentions Iyah360 and Tracey as two white people who are conscious of racial issues, as opposed to many others. She feels that her confrontation with Out of Zion has been beneficial to him, and he confirms that he has learned a lot. However, he does not yet understand his own responsibility for fighting racism. This gives Tracey a chance to teach him. However, her comment about people who try to impose their new knowledge on others reflects back on herself (in the first reasoning of this chapter) and makes her appear a little arrogant. Five months later, when Kelani uses the same confrontational style towards a new member, Out of Zion tells her to be patient with him. She justifies her way of instructing Ryan by saying that her tough style worked with Out of Zion, who confirms this. However, this also gives him the chance to portray himself as a “conscious white,” although he claims not to say this. The above reasoning is interesting for its many cross-references, which show that many white people go through the same steps in their process of becoming aware. While Tracey was attempting to teach Out of Zion, he in turn criticizes Kelani for her teaching style. Finally, we note that both Tracey and Out of Zion are not beyond arrogance and showing off that they know better than other whites. The literature on whiteness reports that many whites feel superior to other whites at an early stage of their development of white antiracist identity. When whites become conscious of racism and start identifying with the experiences of Blacks, they often try to avoid other whites and disassociate from white society. However, when they discover white antiracist role models and their identity becomes more secure, they are again likely to extend empathy to other whites regardless of their commitment to antiracism. (O’Brien 2003)
**Stages in the development of white antiracists**

On the basis of the empirical examples we have analyzed above, we may now distinguish between four different stages in the personal development of white antiracists:

1. **“Colorblindness”** characterized by ignorance and denial of racism, accompanied by liberal rhetoric and simple political correctness (Eurocentric)
2. **Awareness** characterized by overcoming distance, increasing acknowledgement of Black perspectives on racism, and desire to unlearn racism (Relativist)
3. **Integrity** characterized by personal action, increasing translation of awareness into actual behavior change (Moral responsibility)
4. **Activism** refers to collective action to change structural and institutional racism (Political action)

Eileen O’Brien (2003) theorizes the development of white antiracist identity, and places particular emphasis on two aspects, developing empathy and accountability to Blacks, and personal autonomy and empathy in relationships with other whites. She points out this constitutes a direct struggle against racism, because these developments represent the translation of a political commitment to antiracism into personal relationships, where white supremacy is daily reproduced.

*Colorblindness*

The stage of colorblindness is the default stage and starting point for most white people. At this stage, most whites are unaware of the extent of present-day racism, and distance themselves from the only two forms of racism that are generally acknowledged, that is, pre-1960 structural racism, and the ideological racism of radical white-supremacist groups and individuals. They are uncritical of the hegemonic ideology of “colorblindness”, which we discussed in chapter 6 and 7. At this stage, whites are often tolerant of Blacks in rhetoric but more contradictory in practice.
(Chesler, Peet and Sevig 2003) Many would call themselves non-racist, if not antiracist, because they have a perception that this is the politically correct attitude to have. They may focus on using terminology that is politically correct, saying “African American” rather than “Negro.” Most often at this stage, if whites have any Black friends, they are either “token” friends or acquaintances, or Blacks who share a ‘white’ ideology of “colorblindness”. At this stage, antiracism is little more than rhetoric, a label without substance.

**Awareness**

The stage of awareness implies crossing the perception gap between white and Black perspectives that we discussed earlier. It means acknowledging Black perspectives on racism, and may also involve the critical examination of one’s own attitudes. The first step towards unlearning racism is to become conscious of its extent. The following reasoning is a discussion about how to gain awareness of the “Black reality”, and Tracey tells about her experiences. Participants are Ayinde, Tracey and IanI, the Jamaican Rasta.

**IanI:** If you de want to learn from Rasta, go see if you can live with them. Reject all a you privilege. Live in a community that is all a different skin colour from you self. … It would be a very rare one that could achieve the true Awareness from a distance, with no significant experience in them Life. It does happen, but that is even more rare!

**Tracey:** It wasn’t until I had started to attend some purely black events that I began to feel what many of my black brothers and sisters feel constantly in this society for the first time … being judged by the color of one’s skin. It certainly gave me a new perspective and opened my eyes wide on a whole another level.

It was only when I walked down the streets and into the hood, sat on the porches, talked, communed, went into people’s houses, invited people into my house, ate meals/broke bread, worked, sang, slept, built, shared along side of, did the scales fall off my eyes, but it wasn’t easy. Many was the time I was ridiculed for being white in an all black arena …

It strengthened me to FEEL much of this anger and where it come from AND WHY and it showed me to look at myself on a level I had never been challenged to do before. It showed me that respect is a TWO way street. It also showed me why the distrust.

It also showed me the power of a deep love that sprang forth from many a brother and sister that came forth and eventually welcomed me with open hearts souls and minds as we shared in varieties of things TOGETHER. It was only through allowing these experiences to open me wide and teach me from inside did I in fact GET to the other side.
Does that mean I am welcomed with open arms wherever I go now? … Absolutely NOT. These things take time to build. Certainly these experiences I do not see happening for most UNLESS you are willing to allow yourself to walk through the fire and look into a new mirror.

Ayinde: Your eyes are ‘opened’ so you are seeing and not just looking. Incidentally, I feel there are about four other Whites on these forums … that can make a breakthrough on race relations … who have the courage to view the issue for what it is.

IanI points out that it is very difficult to achieve awareness from a distance. For most, it is necessary to physically cross the gap, and stay in a Black community, which will enable personal experience on an emotional level. Identification, love and empathy cannot be achieved from a distance. Tracey tells us about her first stay in a Black community, the experience of being the only person with a different skin color, and being looked at with suspicion for that reason. She felt the anger and distrust of Blacks and learned to understand the reasons behind it. She realized that respect must be mutual, and developed close personal relationships by sharing and doing things together. She is aware that these relationships take time to build, and that she cannot expect to be welcomed in other Black communities simply because of her awareness. Finally, Tracey and Ayinde agree that there are few whites who make this breakthrough, even on the Reasoning Forum.

O’Brien (2003) emphasizes the importance of close personal relationships across the racial divide if white persons are to become aware of Black reality. In interracial relationships that are close enough to survive discussions of racism, a white person acknowledges a Black friend’s account of experiences of racism, and shows empathy rather than reinterpreting or minimizing her experience. Developing empathy with Blacks is a necessary first step for white people wanting to confront racism, but true empathy requires a level of understanding of Black experiences of racism. Without this awareness, white persons’ attempts at showing empathy may come across as patronizing. Close personal relationships give Blacks an opportunity to hold whites accountable, and white antiracists may benefit from this accountability because it serves as a regular ‘reality check’.
We noted in previous chapters the emphasis Rastas put on personal integrity. Developing integrity implies character development and behavior change in order to translate knowledge and ideas into action. Moral values that are often emphasized as ideals for behavior are honesty, empathy, respect and humility. The necessity to move beyond political rhetoric, and translate one’s awareness into personal conduct, is often emphasized on the forum. Ayanna writes,

When we get personally offended then it should make us examine our behavior. … Many of us who would not see ourselves as racist have elements of prejudice that we need to deal with in ourselves. This applies to both black and white people and all the shades in between. Ones can feel offended or uncomfortable or … use that feeling to inspire them to learn. The choice is theirs.

The basis for white antiracism is a thorough examination of one’s own attitudes and behaviors. Let us look at a reasoning between Ayinde, IanI and Jeff, a white American, on how to do this.

Ayinde: Often these are unconscious complexes born out of miseducation and habit. … I point it out … because I hope others become aware of it and … recognize the need to learn.

IanI: Stripping away the layer upon layer upon layer of defenses and rationalizations. … Gaining TRUE respect and honour and appreciation and admiration for a people they barely know. … Trying and trying and trying to become humble … a VERY difficult thing to do in a society that breeds ones to be haughty, arrogant and vain and well achieves it in the sub-conscious. If you are unaware of it, you cannot work to change it.

Jeff: I honestly feel white people need to humble themselves and try and learn from these other great, non-white cultures. I find myself plagued by white mind all the time … At times I get all upset at what people say about white folks, but then when I get past that and actually observe how white people act, in my everyday world, then I see that most stereotypes hold true.

IanI: It takes the white one long, long, long time and serious meditation. … Even then them must catch themselves at times falling back into the trap of the brainwashment. It … must be worked upon constantly and be realized as a “condition” that MUST be overcome! Continuously.

Ayinde emphasizes that the “white superiority complex” is often unconscious. When white people are confronted by Blacks, they can become aware of it and recognize the need to change. IanI points out that there are many layers to white superiority, and that respect and humility are moral qualities that are difficult to develop in a capitalist culture where these values are not rewarded. Jeff agrees and acknowledges the need to change. He demonstrates openness to
criticism without becoming defensive, which is what many Blacks would appreciate in whites. 
(O’Brien 2003) IanI points out that this must be worked on continuously, as one easily falls back into old habits.

Activism

While character development and unlearning racism may be a point of departure, racial inequality on a structural level requires a collective solution. IanI asks how it can be changed collectively,

Is there any way to change it beyond their own Heart/Mind? Collectively? The people of the bush are considered by most “western civilization” to be “primitive” and “backward”. … How does a group go about changing that perception?

Black Rastas on the Reasoning Forum consistently point out that white people should engage in antiracist action among other whites, instead of trying to escape white privilege and feelings of guiltiness by trying to “become Black” or become ‘white Rastas’. Uprising, a Black woman from South Africa gives her opinion,

Let I sistren from South Africa voice InI humble opinions. … InI feel that White Rastas should spend all their time educating white people about the injustices done by the white man and how this is still affecting InI to this day, teach them how to treat InI with dignity and love. … go to the white women and teach them, they need it more than InI.

Rootsie tells us that she takes responsibility for educating other whites about racism in her everyday work as a school teacher. She says that she actually uses examples and lessons from the Reasoning Forum to explain racial issues to her students. Educating other whites requires a level of empathy with other whites, because aggressively self-righteous behavior is not very effective in order to encourage people to change their ideas. (O’Brien 2003) The centrality of personal experience to political action implies that different behaviors may be appropriate for whites and for Blacks. As we have seen, aggressively confrontational behavior by Blacks, who have experienced racism, towards whites, may be very effective. From whites, lacking the experiences which may justify this kind of anger, this behavior may come across as moralizing and arrogant.
Discovering white antiracist role models may help white antiracists develop personal autonomy and reintegrate in white society to fight racism there. White antiracist activists are often silenced, marginalized and discredited in white society, and role models may be hard to find. (O’Brien 2003) But as we will see, they do exist. On the Reasoning Forum, some whites have found antiracist role models in their family history. Jeff writes,

I realize the mistakes of my ancestors, and the ever-going perpetuation of white/Western superiority, but I also have some pride in my own roots and family history. … My grandfather had to move to Colorado from Texas for desegregating his church. My grandparents on my mom’s side were poor Okie “white trash” who picked grapes with the Mexicans here in California.

I suppose that this experience had made my grandparents a bit more humble as they had virtually no rights when they came to this state from Oklahoma. I never heard my grandfather make racial remarks, and he always had a mistrust of the government and rich white folk. Thinking back on it, he never had that white superiority complex that my own dad seems to have.

Jeff writes that his grandfather desegregated his church and had to leave Texas. His grandparents on the other side were poor whites, and he indicates that they were more humble than the elite, indicating a class dimension in white superiority. Another white American man, Burt, also tells us about how he found antiracist role models in his family. He writes,

My family history is one that I can be proud of despite the fact my family is part of the Babylonian system by default. My roots here in the USA go back before the Civil War here in the States. … My family was living in Wisconsin and joined the fight to eliminate slavery from the south … the “Underground Railroad” … passages the Black people took to escape the racist whites of the south. My family played a huge part in harboring and transporting Black people to safety.

Burt tells us that his ancestors in Wisconsin helped Blacks escaping from slavery in the southern states. There are probably many white antiracists like Jeff’s grandparents and Burt’s ancestors who have been written out of official American history for joining Blacks in their struggle against racism. Although we need to be careful to avoid presenting white antiracists as white saviors and liberators of Blacks, these white antiracist role models should be remembered so they can inspire other whites to take responsibility in the struggle against racism, rather than defining it as a Black problem.
According to these Rasta perspectives, effective antiracist struggle requires both Blacks and whites to do their part. Blacks have a long tradition of resistance against white dominance, and do not need whites to tell them what to do. Rather, whites may have much to learn from Blacks in this area. As numerous Rastas have pointed out on this forum, the best contribution to the Black liberation struggle that whites can make is to fight racism among ourselves. Because whites as a group hold overwhelming power and privileges, white self-disempowerment in the material sense may be necessary to dismantle structural racism. Alternatively, we may wait until even peaceful Rastas lose their patience and use violence to claim what is rightfully theirs. Historical examples from Jamaica, England and the US show that Rastafari has also inspired violent revolt.
You all talk so much about your own Hitler, but to us there’s nothing special about Adolf Hitler. It’s just that Hitler tried to do the same thing within Europe that the whites to this very day are doing outside it.


African knowledges …can teach the bourgeois West about its own past and future … as perhaps a “new” anthropology grounded firmly in a critical non-Eurocentric episteme and critique of particular forms of knowledge.

Peter Rigby (1996:45)

Rastafari is part of a global struggle for social justice. As a Black liberation movement, it represents the struggle of one of the most oppressed groups, the descendents of African slaves in the Americas, fighting for their human dignity. In our common struggle for social justice, we may have some things to learn from the insights of the most oppressed; as our global community is no better than how it treats its lowest class. One thing we may learn from Rastafari is the emphasis on morality and the personal dimension. This is an area which has often been neglected by those at the frontlines of political struggles for social justice. Reintegrating the human dimension into Marxism was also the project of Jean Paul Sartre (2001), probably the European philosopher who took the greatest interest in the Black liberation struggle.

In this concluding chapter, I will discuss some lessons we may learn from Rastafari and other Black social movements in the light of some European philosophers who have come to similar conclusions. As we have seen, Rastafari rejects the Eurocentric idea of knowledge as detached from personal, emotional, moral and political considerations. Instead, Rastas emphasize the connection between knowledge and personal experience, empathy and moral integrity. Rastafari also rejects the ideology of competitive individualism, and promotes instead dialogue and...
solidarity. Contrary to Eurocentric knowledge claims, whose basis of authority is institutional power, Rastafari knowledge claims must be ‘reasonable’ in the literal sense of being subjected to ‘reasoning’. The process of reasoning as a way of establishing truth prevents knowledge from being elevated to a status of unquestionable dogma. The knowledge claims of Rastafari are continually challenged in reasoning by the personal experiences of others. While this way of establishing knowledge resonates with scientific ideals, in practice Western science has too often been corrupted by its intimate connections to political and economic power. Rasta epistemology exposes the Eurocentric perspectives and interests hidden behind false claims to ‘objectivity’ and ‘universalism’ made in the name of science, and thus effectively delegitimizes modern forms of knowledge. Connecting knowledge to personal experience and moral integrity is not exclusive to the epistemologies of Rastafari, Blacks and feminists. However, experience-based epistemologies are more likely to be developed by oppressed groups, because the privileged tend to justify their power by imposing their version of reality on others. This is most effectively done by claims to ‘objectivity’, ‘universality’ and ‘neutrality’ which disguise the subjectivity of their knowledge. A number of critical European philosophers have come to similar conclusions, and we will discuss the insights of a few of them in the following.

Sartre (2001) had a close dialogue with a number of Black intellectuals including Fanon, and was one of the few European intellectuals who recognized the African development of new forms of knowledge, representing a counter-modernity against the West. He recognized that the anti-colonial movements were not narrowly political, but that they developed their positions through a revolutionary Third World epistemology. Inspired by Third World Marxism, Sartre rejected the idea that individual consciousness is determined by material conditions, and developed a ‘Marxist humanism’ which takes the agency of human subjects as its starting point. He understood freedom as taking back the responsibility to become a human subject rather than an object of domination. Sartre’s analysis of the anti-Semitic construction of Jewishness was inspired by the African American intellectual Richard Wright, who pointed out that there is no “Negro problem” in the US, only a white problem. In Anti-Semite and Jew, Sartre argued that the attempts to escape a stigmatized racial identity such as Jewishness or Blackness represent
inauthenticity, but he also admitted that taking responsibility for authenticity requires courage. That study subsequently informed Fanon’s (1967) perspective on psychological oppression.

For Sartre, identity was the starting point for politics rather than its goal. His perspectives on political commitment and moral responsibility for each individual’s role in history originated in an ethical concern with individual freedom. While initially rejecting violence on ethical grounds, Sartre ended up supporting Fanon’s (1965) advocacy of violence as a necessary counter-response to colonial violence. Rather than implying a rejection of ethics, Sartre’s change of position was based on the recognition that violence may be a historical necessity. (Young 2001) Young (ibid.) contends that only postcolonial theory has continued Sartre’s articulation of materialist history with subjective experience. On the other hand, Sartre’s Marxist orientation led him to reduce ‘race’ to class, and the affirmation of Black consciousness to a negative antithesis in his dialectics towards a socialist society. (Fanon 1967) This Eurocentric move may have cost him a prominent place in postcolonial theory. (Young 2001)

**Racism and Anti-Semitism**

As we discussed above, Sartre theorized the Black and Jewish experiences in the light of each other. Gilroy (1993) warns against relativizing the unique experiences of the Jewish Holocaust and the Black experience of slavery and racism. However, the uniqueness of these experiences should not prevent us from generalizing certain critical insights drawn from them. These insights may inform a critical perspective on the Western modernity which produced these horrors. On the basis of their experiences with modernity, Jewish intellectuals such as Zygmunt Bauman have come to similar conclusions as have Black intellectuals. Similarities can also be found in the aspirations and rhetoric of Zionism and Black Nationalism. Further, Blacks and Jews share a common experience of fear and vulnerability towards the Western scientific domination of self and nature. The Black experience of racism and the Jewish Holocaust illustrate the complicity of modern rationality with genocide and racism. Despite his Eurocentrism, Bauman exemplifies the advantages of a standpoint of marginality and suffering, which gives a clarity of perception that
can benefit the moral status of the world. Jewish and Black experiences with Western modernity may help us repudiate the ideologies of progress and modernity which have victimized millions of people. (Gilroy 1993)

Based on their interpretation of the Bible, Rastas have long identified with Israel. Black scholars have appropriated the Jewish concept of diaspora, and Black activists cite the Nuremberg trials to justify their demands for reparations for slavery and colonialism from European and American imperialist powers. The Jews were fortunate to see Nazi Germany defeated and held responsible, while the colonial and neocolonial powers still rule the world. Some have argued that the only reason Hitler was defeated is that he did to whites within Europe the same things that whites have always done outside of Europe. While anti-Semitism is a form of racism, Jews currently also benefit from white privilege. Like countless Black theorists, Bauman advocates the necessity of personal integrity and moral responsibility for both perpetrators and victims. Without integrity, victims may reverse and replicate oppression when they seize power, as we have seen Communists do in the Soviet Union, and Zionists in Israel. Bauman (1989) points out that while Hitler’s Germany was held accountable for its atrocities, Stalin’s Soviet Union was not. We may add the European imperial powers, the United States, and Israel, all guilty of genocide but never held accountable. Bauman points out that the collective consciousness of Western culture never fundamentally changed after the Holocaust. Instead, we distanced ourselves from an allegedly unique Nazi ideology, while racism and imperialism were reconfigured and continued as if nothing happened. History supports the Rasta emphasis on the necessity of personal responsibility and moral integrity to avoid replicating oppression after a revolution. Let us now turn to a discussion of Bauman’s perspectives on morality and justice, and its implications for social theory.

**Society produces evil**

Bauman (ibid.) interprets the Holocaust in the light of psychologist Stanley Milgram’s experiment on obedience to authority, and points out that obedience rather than disobedience
leads to evil. Milgram’s experiment indicated that any individual may commit evil, given the social circumstances. Rather than being committed by individuals with evil intentions, evil is committed by ordinary people obeying authorities. Evil is thus related less to personality than to certain forms of social structure and interaction. Morality depends on empathy, which is strongest in face-to-face interaction. Distance creates moral indifference by enabling the perpetrator to remain ignorant of the causal relationship between his actions and their consequences for his victims. In the case of the Holocaust, the lack of empathy which enabled immorality was facilitated by a dehumanizing socialization, which created a distance between doer and deed through ideology, technology and bureaucracy. Society may erode empathy through authorization, routinization and dehumanization, which are structurally present in any modern society. Modern bureaucracy and technology create a distance which erodes personal responsibility, and replaces empathy with ‘objectivity’ and ‘professionalism’. The instrumental rationality characteristic of modern society implies a distance that objectifies and dehumanizes people. It defines morality as irrelevant, and allows such immoral social phenomena as modern warfare, capitalism, racism and ultimately, the Holocaust. Obedience is best promoted by monopolistic authority, where the protests of the victims are the only opposition. On the other hand, the voice of moral conscience is best heard in the noise of political disagreement. (Bauman 1989, Vetlesen and Nortvedt 1994)

Bauman (ibid.) also draws on another psychological experiment, conducted by Zimbardo, which showed that the power structure itself may create a schismogenesis, where the superiority of prison guards is reflected in the obedience of the prisoners, which again tempts the guards to further demonstrate their power. The experiment indicates that the common strategy of oppressed individuals to obey the demands of the dominant group may lead to further abuses of power. It suggests that victims should engage in active resistance, requiring consciousness and solidarity, rather than accepting (and thus legitimizing) the power structure which produces the evil actions of the perpetrators. Those who have been placed in the group of perpetrators need to develop a strong moral integrity in the face of authority. Bauman concludes that while immorality is produced by society, morality is personal and issues from the self.
Bauman’s (1989) analysis of the Holocaust led him to an investigation of the relationship between society and morality. Mainstream social theories of morality have proven inadequate to explain the Holocaust, because they tend to deny the existence of morality independent from social institutions. Malinowski and Durkheim claimed that morality only exists within a society, and their followers have explained immoral behavior as an expression of pre-social drives, while equating morality with social conformity and obedience to social norms. The Holocaust did not fit this paradigm. The social reductionist view of morality stems from a Eurocentric idea which sees nature as evil and in need of taming by ‘civilization’. In the self image of Western culture, it was reasoned that since we are materially superior and can control nature, we are also morally superior. Bauman emphasizes, however, that it was not society as such which served as the model for the moralizing mission, but *Western society*, which employed this strategy to disguise its oppression of others. As an alternative to these social theories which claim that morality is socially produced, Bauman suggests that society merely manipulates a pre-existing morality which is rooted in existential factors.

**Resisting socialization**

In light of the Holocaust, Bauman emphasizes the responsibility of individuals to resist socialization. According to this perspective, morality may lie in disobedience of social authority. He applies Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of a pre-societal morality which springs out of “social being with others” rather than from the institutions of society. This morality exists in every human being and is rooted in human nature as social beings. Levinas’ concept of morality implies responsibility for the other, who cannot be reduced to sameness. Morality thus rests on the emotional ability of empathy. Levinas’ concept of morality represents an ‘ethics of proximity’ (Vetlesen and Nortvedt 1994), which defines the human subject as an emotional participant rather than an objectifying observer. In Levinas’ theory, the other has primacy to the self, and responsibility for the other defines human subjectivity. Philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen (ibid.) points out that this asymmetrical responsibility contains the two dangers of paternalism and
exploitation of generosity. In both cases, there is a lack of respect for the autonomy and integrity of the other. Thus, caring for the other must be based on respect.

According to Bauman (1989), modern society increases the distance between human beings up to a point where moral responsibility is dissolved. In order to disguise the oppression of nature and the other, and justify modern rationality, we have created a myth of “the law of the jungle.” In fact, pre-social ‘nature’ contains the same morality that the modern West seeks to neutralize and replace with domination. Instead of realizing this, mainstream social theorists have constructed a theory of rational actors who perceive the subjectivity of others as an obstacle to their effective control, reducing the other to a factor that can be manipulated with the help of understanding, rhetoric and psychological knowledge. According to the theory of rational choice, an actor’s behavior towards others is evaluated in terms of rationality rather than morality. In a situation of “social being with others” which is organized by the goals of the “rational actor”, morality is perceived as an external disturbance. However, personal relations defy instrumental rationality. In order to resist rationality, individuals must stubbornly insist on the uniqueness of each person.

**Personal integrity and social justice**

Neo-liberal capitalism demands flexibility and “moral mobility” from individuals, and despite its individualist ideology, it actually produces weak selves. Societal control over the individual is never more effective than when the individual has internalized the hegemonic ideology. An autonomous self, on the other hand, demands to be different from society. The kind of individual desired by neo-liberalism is one that not only treats other people as means, but also turns herself into a means. Personal integrity, which is uncompromising and presupposes a sense of justice, may thus become a standpoint for criticism and opposition, by appealing to universal moral standards. Persons who strive for integrity resist against being corrupted by the market. The goal of morality is freedom, not in the sense of the flexibility of individual choices, but in terms of autonomy and self-determination based on self-knowledge. (Vetlesen and Henriksen 2003)
Bauman (1997) discusses the mutual dependency between moral responsibility for the other on a micro level, and social justice on a macro level, and argues that the road between them leads through movement politics. Justice itself is better understood as a movement rather than as a goal, as improvements are always partial. Morality and justice are thus open-ended. They have no patented solutions; they always include side-effects and risks, such as the dangers of self-contentment and a once-and-for-all cleaned conscience. The key to social justice lies in moral responsibility for the other nearby. The privileged need to rise above their self-interests and consider themselves responsible for the humanity of others, and endorse justice in thought and action before they are forced to do so.

In modern capitalist society, the promotion of moral behavior thus constitutes resistance against social hegemony. Instrumental rationality reduces human life to a struggle for survival, and we accept calculations of gain and loss as an authoritative argument against morality. Most people easily convince themselves that they need not care about morality when faced with a situation where there is no good choice, where the good choice comes at great cost, or where they can rely on rational cost-benefit analysis. Rationality thus helps the powerful to commit their evil. On the other hand, some individuals do resist evil, and the testimony of those who make resistance destroys the authority of the logic of survival. In the final analysis, it is a choice, and we can choose moral responsibility. (Bauman 1989) We note that the critical perspectives of Bauman and Vetlesen resemble those of the Rastas, who are also emphasizing personal integrity and moral responsibility as a form of resistance against the dehumanizing forces of capitalism.

**Unlearning White Superiority**

In his analysis of the Holocaust, Bauman (ibid.) emphasized that evil is committed by individuals obeying social authority. Further, he pointed out that the instrumental rationality of modern society facilitates a distance between the acting person and the consequences of her actions, thus eroding empathy and moral responsibility. In the case of the Holocaust, Nazi ideology and segregation created a distance which facilitated the objectification and dehumanization of certain
‘others’. A similar distance is created between whites and Blacks through ideological and structural racism. In the Rasta analysis of racism, the unquestioning acceptance and internalization of the hegemonic ideologies of Eurocentrism and competition leads individuals to reproduce racism. Rastas seek to liberate individual selves from this ‘mental slavery’ and encourage them to develop empathy and moral integrity. Informed by a spiritual conception of the world, the Rastas have reached a similar conclusion about the pre-societal nature of morality as Levinas. Similar to Bauman’s critique of instrumental rationality, Rastafari has also identified a threat to morality on the level of epistemology.

In order to resist a hegemonic ideology which legitimizes the treatment of other persons as objects to be manipulated in the pursuit of material power and wealth, Rastafari focuses on personal relationships. According to the ethics of Levinas, morality springs out of “social being with others” which is characterized by empathy, respect and responsibility for the other. This moral orientation can be cultivated to serve as a platform for resistance against the dehumanizing forces of the dominant ideology. Personal integrity is thus understood as the starting point for social change. Bauman (1997) pointed out that the road to social justice starts with moral responsibility in close personal relationships. Social movements such as Rastafari, with their focus on the personal dimension, are prime examples of connecting personal morality to social justice.

Rastafari seeks to counter the internalized ideology of individual competition with an emphasis on peace, love, empathy and solidarity. This orientation is combined with uncompromising integrity in order to resist the hegemonic ideology. We noted in the introduction that Rastafari consists of three dimensions, the symbolic, the spiritual and the socio-political. In the symbolic dimension, Rastafari affirms the positive value of African identity in opposition to a Eurocentric ideology which denigrates Africa. This symbolic resistance not only serves to empower Blacks, but is also effective in bringing whites to an awareness of Black experiences and perspectives. Reggae music plays a central role in confronting whites with a Black reality, and attracts many whites to Rastafari to learn more about Black perspectives. Like the symbolic dimension, the
spiritual dimension is open to both Blacks and whites. Spirituality informs the Rasta conception of moral responsibility and personal integrity. In the socio-political dimension, however, Rastafari is a Black social movement which struggles for Black self-determination and autonomy from whites. Consequently, there can be no prominent place for whites in this dimension. However, whites are encouraged to support the Black struggle for social justice by engaging in antiracist action among other whites.

Rastafari thus engages in consciousness-raising among both Blacks and whites. The movement recognizes that both oppressor and oppressed need to change. The title of my thesis, “Unlearning White Superiority”, is intended to reflect this. Rastafari calls on Blacks who have internalized “white superiority” to liberate themselves from ‘mental slavery’, and empower themselves by rejecting Eurocentric ideals and affirming their African identity and spiritual values. Whites are confronted with their taken-for-granted assumptions of superiority, and encouraged to change their dominating behavior as a part of spiritual development. Finally, “unlearning white superiority” also has implications for social theory. I will conclude this thesis by returning to the possibility of a non-Eurocentric anthropology.

In the introduction, we noted that D’Andrade’s (1995) objectivist position maintains the superiority of Western rationality, while Scheper-Hughes’ (1995) moral position is constantly in danger of maintaining the superiority of Western morality. While neutrality is impossible and any claim to such obfuscates Eurocentric agendas, taking an explicitly moral stand is more honest. However, there are no simple epistemological rules that can prevent turning moral responsibility into Eurocentric moralism. Eurocentrism refers to false claims of ‘objectivity’, ‘universality’ and ‘neutrality’, which are conscious or unconscious disguises for subjectivity, and serve to conceal one’s self-interest. The social significance of Eurocentrism lies in the fact that dominance and resistance are struggles over the right to define reality. Cultural imperialism is the attempted imposition of European definitions of reality, and serves to discredit oppositional experiences and knowledges. However, Eurocentrism as a way of thinking can be unlearned. This requires a process of continuous learning which cannot be done if we insist on keeping a distance, because
distance prevents learning. Unlearning Eurocentrism requires honesty about our own position as a starting point. We will inevitably be wrong along the way, but honesty allows us to be challenged and adjust our views. If we acknowledge that we do not always know best, and recognize the validity of others’ perspectives, we may gradually learn how to treat our ‘others’ with respect. We cannot unlearn Eurocentrism alone, through some kind of logical or intellectual maneuver, but only by engaging in a dialogue with the ‘other’ which allows us to have our viewpoints continually challenged.
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143


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