Uncomfortable Truths

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Source: *Journal of West Indian Literature*, November 2018, Vol. 26, No. 2, Special Issue: Marlon James (November 2018), pp. 96-109

Published by: Journal of West Indian Literature

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26742798

Uncomfortable Truths: Lifewriting, Trauma and Survivance in Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

(For Isabel Grosvenor)

Caryn Rae Adams

Source: Portrait of Marlon James, photo by Jeffrey Skemp.

Marlon James's Man Booker Prize winning novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is, simply put, a colossal work. Neither brief in size nor context, it chronicles one of the most violent periods of Jamaica's post-slavery history. Set in various parts of Kingston from the late 1950s to the United States in the 1990s, James's novel deconstructs traditional narrative conventions, with various plots working alongside and against each other and an impressive cast of 75 characters, including one character who undergoes three name changes. The multiple voices not only highlight Caribbean writers' preoccupation with the oral tradition, but also accurately points to the race/class stratification that continues to dominate contemporary Jamaica, due to the long history of colonisation.

During James's appearance at the 2016 Sydney Writers' Festival, a member of the audience suggested that growing up in such a violent society would have undoubtedly contributed to the creation of *A Brief History*. James subsequently took to social media to lament this ignorance, which clearly overlooks his vivid imagination, raw talent and thorough research. This article addresses what I describe as the writer's responsibility to highlight often ignored and what I term 'uncomfortable truths,' while resisting dominant narratives which seek to silence and marginalise the historically oppressed. It also provides a re-reading of *A Brief History* through the Native American framework of survivance, which relies on innovative culture-specific narrative strategies in its examination of historical traumas. I argue that James's narrativization of violence in the novel is rooted in the horrific history of colonisation, which continues to haunt the region.

Survivance transcends its original 19th century definition of survival, and, as Karl Kroeber asserts, celebrated Native American writer and critic Gerald Vizenor is responsible for revisioning the term in the 20th century:

> He [Gerald Vizenor] uses *survivance* to subordinate survival's implications of escape from catastrophe and marginal preservation; survivance subtly reduced the power of the destroyer. He seizes on *survivance's* older sense of *succession*, orienting its connotations not toward *loss* but *renewal* and *continuity* into the future rather than memorializing the past. (25, emphasis in original)

It celebrates the continued resistance of Native Americans (and by extension, other indigenous and marginalised peoples) against oppression and exclusion by historically dominant groups. As a literary discourse, it highlights the importance of maintaining Native American cultural practices, made absent by European arrival, through a privileging of experimental narrative techniques, which include Non-Standard English language registers, polyvocal narration, non-linear narrative structures, and the celebration of indigenous spiritualties. Survivance therefore rejects victimhood, and my reading of *A Brief History* reveals the ways in which the urban poor are positioned as survivors struggling against a system designed to keep them under control.

Why Survivance? An Overview of Trauma and Postcolonial Theory

While I am aware that some of the narrative strategies described above are recurring features in several literatures worldwide, and especially across the Caribbean, I argue that survivance legitimises the traumatic experiences of racialised minorities in a way Western analyses of trauma and even postcolonial readings, have failed to adequately represent. The study of trauma has been widespread in the past two decades and it has been documented extensively in a number of academic disciplines, ranging from psychiatry to literature. Rooted in psychoanalysis, contemporary trauma studies have been heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer's writings on hysteria. Leydesdorff et al. argue that these early psychoanalysts saw certain illnesses not caused by a recognisable disease, but "as states of psychic disturbance and disconnection, whose underlying causes could be traced back to traumatic experiences in the past" (2).

Yet, because the symptoms in a growing number of psychological illnesses (especially among returned soldiers) were so similar to hysteria, Freud and Breuer completely ignored the correlation, as at the time, it was exclusively regarded as a female illness (Vickroy 15). The medical community

also became divided with the increasing occurrences of shell shock in veterans, and questions arose regarding the authenticity of ailments and treatment procedures. Joanna Bourke contends that diagnoses became problematic for military personnel in particular, because there was concern that soldiers may be shirking their duties, due to fear of the battlefield and possible death, rather than because of a noticeable and treatable illness (109). The Holocaust is possibly the most documented event in contemporary trauma studies. The displacement and mass genocide of thousands of Jewish people during the tumultuous World Wars have resulted in lifelong emotional scars, with Leydesdorff et al. noting that that survivors of concentration camps are more likely to experience severe defects of the brain, which may result in the onset of degenerative diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's (4).

The reclassification of trauma's original definition by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980, saw it finally defined as a psychological ailment, and symptoms associated with "shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis [as] responses to both human and natural catastrophes," were now to be understood in terms of PTSD or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Caruth 3). In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth argues that this new development in the study of trauma did not surface without its complications. She states that while a concrete definition of trauma provides an inclusive framework for a number of previously ignored neuroses, it also limits the analyses to events only "outside the range of usual human experience" (3). It also raises considerable concerns in psychoanalytic research, where determining whether or not trauma is an illness motivated by an aberration of one's memories (and the emotions tied to these memories) becomes questionable. Despite these inconsistencies, scholars and clinical practitioners agree on one thing: trauma's belated nature, that is, how it continually haunts the survivor:

> there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (Caruth 4)

Stef Craps and Gert Buelens note that Caruth's study of trauma aims at reassessing history and providing a clearer understanding of issues previously entangled in social and political rhetoric. They further suggest, "by bringing the insights of deconstructive and psychoanalytic scholarship to the analysis of cultural artefacts that bear witness to traumatic histories, critics can gain access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation"(1). However, in the foundational work on trauma, there remains a commitment to privileging white Western experiences, ignoring those of the historically marginalised, and it "may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world" (Craps and Buelens 2).

Yet, postcolonial representations of trauma are not without limitations. While it remains a theoretical framework which has highlighted key issues ranging from migration to identity, as well as "responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe" (Ashcroft et al. 2), some findings by key postcolonial critics perpetuate imperialist ideologies through their adoption of Western theoretical models, which continue to silence historically marginalised groups. In *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order*, David Punter refers specifically to the work of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabba, suggesting, "that in their deployment of 'Western' theory they have become involved in prolonging and repeating imperialist subjugation, to the point at which Spivak can solemnly claim, in the teeth of the evidence, that the subaltern 'cannot speak'" (9). However, he acknowledges

that they are a number of critics now speaking out "to confront the claims of 'high theory' with the exigencies of political reality" (9). Their focus is therefore centred on understanding and acknowledging the implications of this political reality, rather than on theoretical hypotheses, which continue to silence rather than articulate the concerns of minorities.

The traumatogenic effects of the colonial experience therefore cannot be efficiently articulated through theoretical paradigms that rely heavily on Western academic discourses for interpretation, ignoring the cultural signifiers present. While dominant Western theories of psychoanalysis usually privilege disclosure of traumatic experiences to initiate healing, survivance offers a 'healing', which is specific to Indigenous cultures, and sensitive to the needs of the community; demonstrating continued resistance against colonial oppression in its many facets. This active resistance is demonstrated through specific narrative techniques, and makes visible the experiences of the marginalised, which were once marked absent in early colonial accounts (Vizenor 3).

'Ambush in the Night': Caribbean Lifewriting as Counter-Discourse

Many reviewers of *A Brief History* describe it as a historical novel, which "not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters (who may themselves be historical personages) and for the course of the narrative" (Abrams 256). In my examination of the text, I argue that it also belongs to the postcolonial autobiographical genre. C. L. Innes stresses that there is one significant distinction between postcolonial autobiography and Western autobiography: while Western autobiography is concerned with the individual's personal growth and development (particularly in the patriarchal European Bildungsroman), the postcolonial autobiography uses the individual's experience to represent that of his or her community, "or as the embodiment of a new nation's struggle to come into being and its establishment of a culture and ideological identity" (56).

Lisa R. Brown also notes the significance of autobiographical modes in Caribbean writing (276). Brown posits, "the use of 'real life' experiences enacts the dismantling of social, economic and political forces that limit self-discovery and expression" (276). While she agrees with Helen Tiffin that the performative nature of Caribbean literature is the first aspect of resistance to European literary models (80), she similarly suggests, like Innes, that Caribbean Lifewriting (which includes autobiography, biography, memoirs, journals, slave narratives, diaries, etc.) is not concerned with the life of the individual because "where societies are interpenetrated by plural linguistic, cultural and economic forces and shaped by constant waves of migration, non-traditional family structures and non-Western belief systems, the idea of 'real life' necessarily constitutes articulation between and among these variables" (277). To Brown, Caribbean lifewriting allows for a blurring of genres, creating hybridity "in form, neither autobiography nor biography but an amalgam of both and of history as well" (Eakin quoted in Brown 277).

This analysis informs my examination of *A Brief History* as a narrative which crosses genres and defies the linearity of Western narratives, through its use of the central plot, the attempted assassination of reggae superstar Robert Nesta Marley, at his Hope Road residence on 3rd December 1976. As Christopher Tayler describes it, the plot is "connect[ed] … to many aspects of Jamaican history … especially in its opening stages, to the facts and testimony and rumours gathered up by Timothy White, an American music journalist who periodically updated his 1983 biography of Marley, *Catch a Fire*, until

his death in 2002" ("Goings-on in Tivoli Gardens"). While taking a break during a band rehearsal for the 'Smile Jamaica' concert, Marley, his wife Rita and manager Don Taylor are shot by intruders. They survived their injuries, and the novel uses this attack to detail the history of clientelism and corruption in Jamaica.

Defined as "a more or less personalised relationship between actors or a set of actors, commanding unequal wealth, status or influence, based on conditional loyalties, and involving mutually beneficial transactions" (Flynn 134), clientelism controls the working class and urban poor by providing them with short-term material comforts (housing, employment opportunities) in exchange for loyalty votes during elections. To ensure that the constituents keep their end of the bargain, politicians from both political parties employ "power-brokers … to exercise continuous control" (Edmonds 56). These 'political gangsters' have several functions, including

> … performing internal security functions to deliver electoral support, police/protect the party faithful; securing strategic territory at the behest of the political hierarchy…. In return for these party loyalties, the gangs are given a large degree of territorial autonomy, consisting of a withdrawal of police and military forces from no-go domains. And in many cases they are granted the licence to operate their own system of justice and welfare delivery. (Edmonds 57)

Clientelist relationships soared throughout Jamaica in the 1960s and 1970s (Edmonds 57). Widespread poverty in Kingston led to escalating violence, and 'Rude Boys' or 'Rudies,' frustrated with their circumstances and wanting a better life, "had begun to fight each other for control of 'the ghetto.'" These battles contributed to "the development of what would come to be known in Jamaica as 'Turf Politics' — where political parties sought geographical or positional control over given areas, using gangs as part of an electoral strategy for securing votes" (Edmonds 58). Violence erupted when opposing sides felt that preferential treatment was only offered to supporters of the ruling party, as demonstrated during the construction of the housing complex at Tivoli Gardens by the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 1965 (Sives 75).

The victory of the People's National Party (PNP) in 1972 saw a shift in Jamaica's political alliance in the international sphere: while the JLP's leader Edward Seaga was aligned with the capitalist ideas of the US, the PNP charted a new path, which leader, Michael Manley, declared as Democratic Socialism in 1974 (Edmonds 61). Although he took over the country during a difficult economic period, "his government introduced a raft of progressive social policies, including public housing programmes, rent control, price controls on basic commodities, a minimum wage, literacy programmes, maternity leave for women, healthcare, and youth employment programmes" (Edmonds 61). However, to the US, Manley was deemed a communist, (demonstrated through his friendship with Cuban president Fidel Castro), and his "increased bauxite levy and formation of the International Bauxite Association (IBA) … generated a new wave of, unsettling US investors and Washington" (Edmonds 61). This caused international corporations to pull out of Jamaica, and by 1978, Manley had to make a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial aid for the country (Edmonds 61).

In an effort to topple the already fragile PNP administration and resume control of the government, the JLP sent their political enforcers to engage in an all-out war with PNP gunmen (Blum 263). It was also revealed years later by ex-CIA agent Philip Agee that "the CIA was using the JLP as its instrument in the campaign against the Michael Manley government" (King 147) by secretly shipping arms from the US to Jamaica to train youths in tactical warfare, as well as providing travel documents

like visas and passports to those needing to escape the law. Most incriminating is the testimony of a former Shower Posse gang member in the late 1980s, which revealed not only his role as a political enforcer for the JLP and the number of murders he committed on the party's behalf, but also his CIA connections, in which he states the "'the United States made me what I am'" (Edmonds 65-66).

A Brief History reflects these social ills and the ensuing violence during this period, acting as a counter-discourse to the dominant narrative of the island as 'paradise,' continuing the literary tradition of many writers across the Caribbean region.[1] Its structure is by far the most adventurous in recent novels from the region, with 5 long sections introducing a range of different characters with very distinct voices. For the reader, this facilitates a multiplicity of experiences and/or points of view, absent from the usual Western life narratives, which privilege the account of a single entity. It also demonstrates the powerful effect of violence on communities, and its corruption of the innocent. This impact of violence is tragically exemplified in the sad tale of one of the novel's characters, Bam-Bam. Orphaned at a young age, he is informally adopted by the Don of the fictional ghetto, Copenhagen City, Papa-Lo. Bam-Bam witnesses his parents' murder by a rival gang while hiding under a blanket, and this grisly tale is indicative of the widespread violence during the period:

> And he groan and groan and groan and fuck my father head then pull himself out and hold my father head steady and fire. *Pap*. Not like the pow in cowboy movie and not like when Harry Callahan fire, but one big sharp *pap* that shake the room. The blood splat on the wall. My gasp and the gunshot go off the same time so nobody know me under the blanket still.
>
> My mother run back in and start to laugh and kick my father and Funnyboy go up to her and shoot her in the face. She fall right on top of me, so when he say find the little boy they look everywhere but under my mother. (James 13)

Bam-Bam also gives readers insight into the change occurring in the ranks of Copenhagen City — a change to which the boss, Papa-Lo, is not privy: "I grow up in Copenhagen City and watch the guns change and know they don't come from Papa-Lo. They come from two men who bring guns to the ghetto and the one man who show me how to use it" (James15). Bam-Bam further informs readers that these men teaching the youths to use the weapons are from outside of Jamaica, as they also provide American foods like "corned beef and Aunt Jemima maple syrup that nobody know what to do with, and white sugar. And Kool-Aid and Pepsi and a big bag of flour and other things nobody in the ghetto can buy and even if they could, nobody would be selling" (James 33). The clientelist relationships common amongst the two political parties were also replicated by the CIA, providing weapons and food supplies to political enforcers in exchange for loyalty through violence.

The uncompromising nature of violence is further highlighted through Papa-Lo's musings on ghetto life. While capable of ruthless murder, he has grown tired of the violence decimating the youth on both sides, in the name of 'politricks'. His dis-ease with gangster life begins soon after he murders a schoolboy in error:

> … and the little boy grab me shirt and bawling no, no, no, it coming up on me, no, no, no… and he grab you hard, harder than he ever gripped anything because maybe if he put all the strength, all the will in just those ten fingers on a living thing, maybe he can

> hold on to life…. Shoot the boy again, Josey Wales say, but I couldn't do nothing but look. Josey walk over to me, put the gun to him forehead and pow. (James 87)

When asked about the violence that informs much of the novel, particularly Papa-Lo's confrontation with the schoolboy, James states: "I didn't want to fall into a pornography of violence, but I think violence should be violent…. This kid will never run home, never have another birthday. His death is slow, nightmarish. And you have to explore the consequences — the people who live on with his death" (Harvey, "Marlon James interview"). These consequences are not just personal, as relayed in the schoolboy's mother's reaction to his death —"the boy mother who walk all the way to the front of me house screaming 'bout how her boy was a good boy who love him mother and go to school where he just pass six GCE subject and was going to get scholarship to University" (James 87), but in fact demonstrates how the increasing political warfare hinders any attempt to escape the poverty of the ghetto and seek a better life through education.

Through a blurring of genres (history, biography, autobiography), *A Brief History* provides a revisioning of key events while simultaneously chronicling the story of the oppressed, absent from dominant discourses. Like Native survivance narratives, experimental narrative structures demonstrate creative innovation through the use of specific literary devices (metaphors, humour, irony,) "that seek to confront the tragic closure of culture and engender a sense of Native presence instead of historical absence" (Vizenor, "American Indian Art and Literature Today" 44-45). These techniques further challenge Western narratives and Native commercial fiction, which are focused on disseminating "cultural information that [readers] are already familiar with largely through stereotypes of Native tragedy, Native suffering and the complications of the loss of traditions and cultures" (Vizenor, "American Indian Art and Literature Today" 46). As a narrative of survivance, *A Brief History* offers a version of history which demonstrates presence, that is, makes visible the experiences of the oppressed, over the absence circulated in early historical, political and anthropological accounts.

'Rastaman Chant': Language and Survivance

The language in *A Brief History* is James's real triumph and demonstrates his ease with representing the Jamaican oral tradition in narrative form. A refusal to rely on Standard English language registers is not new in narratives from the region, with Samuel Selvon's 1956 novel *Lonely Londoners* pioneering this experimental use of the English language. In "Language Use and West Indian Literary Criticism," Merle Hodge describes the various ways language is represented in Caribbean writing:

> There is the traditional format of Standard English for narration and Creole only in dialogue, with the two locked into sealed compartments. A fairly modern option is the fluid narrative voice that is mainly SE but accommodates code-mixing and code-switching…. Writers may use Creole for both narration and dialogue, while some may opt for avoidance, translating Creole speech into SE, or employing some form stylization rather than naturalistic representation. (473)

In her survey of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, Elaine Savory refers to Kamau Brathwaite's foundational theory of 'nation language,' which she argues, "indicates not just orality but the fact that each Caribbean nation has its own linguistic continuum and formations of Creole" (721). Once reserved for the urban poor and working classes, Hodge notes that "a new breed of writers would

emerge from the underclass, and unlike earlier writers of colour, they would *embrace and affirm their roots*, eventually installing the West Indian peasant and labourer at the centre of West Indian Literature" (475, emphasis added). For contemporary Caribbean writers, the ability to switch between language codes not only demonstrates their creativity, but also informs their development of characters and narrative point of view (Hodge 476).

Survivance stories strive for similar literary innovation, and they are concerned with the multiple meanings inherent in language. As Fojtovà asserts, "relying on the power of stories, humor, wit, and imagination to create, Vizenor fights with words to present his *own perspective* and assert his right to create new self-beginnings" (86, emphasis added). The mimetic capabilities of language do not interest Vizenor —rather, he argues that the power of language lies in its ability to make new (and multiple) meanings of reality through imagination. The *re-imagination* that occurs in Vizenor's language transcends the limitations of Western language patterns and provides a space for formerly silenced stories, through the development of creative modes rooted in cultural practices. As Fojtovà asserts:

> The textual landscape Vizenor creates is populated with paradox, irony and language games. It is a space in which through the liberatory possibilities of language, he vitalizes other meanings and multiple ways of interpreting. It is a space which resists clarity and simplification and makes a plea for imagination. The imaginative hermeneutics Vizenor employs complicates the precise, evokes the ambiguous, and embraces the paradoxical. (87-88)

One such paradox is the use of the English language in his narratives. Vizenor chooses not to write in his tribal language (Anishinaabemowin), and while we can determine that this choice could be motivated by his desire to reach a larger and more diverse audience (like many writers from postcolonial territories who choose to write in the language of the coloniser over their own native tongues) Fojtová suggests that [English] "has become both the language of oppression and coercion, as well as the language of liberation" (88).

While critics focus on how the interior monologues, stream of consciousness narration, poetry and snippets of conversations develop characterisation in the novel (Tayler, "Goings-on in Tivoli Gardens"), my re-reading of *A Brief History* also focuses on how language represents the dichotomy between oppression and liberation in Jamaican society. Oppression is aptly demonstrated in ghetto life, where there is a loss of hope for a better future, principally through education. This is a common motif that pervades Caribbean writing, and in James's novel, poverty and state sanctioned violence ruin the individual's chance for success. Weeper, one of the gunmen in the narrative was destined for a bright future, with his "three GCE subject, in English, mathematics and technical drawing … reading big book even before Babylon send him to prison" (James 65). A case of 'mistaken' identity, torture by the police and five years in prison turned him into a hardened criminal who "will kill a boy right in front of his father and have the father count his last five breath" (James 65). As fellow gangster Demus notes of Weeper: "When he talk like a Jamaican, he talk all coarse and evil. When he talk like a white man, he sound like he reading a book with big word" (James 108).

Major character and second-in-command to the Papa-Lo, Josey Wales, uses language as a form of liberation. He has his eyes on a bigger prize: deliverance from political patronage by establishing himself as one of the key players in the expanding drug trade. Through his narration, we see the breakdown in the ranks of Copenhagen City and are informed about the CIA's role in destabilising the other side through gun violence. His secret meetings with the CIA and the politicians are almost

comical, as he pretends that he is only sufficiently literate, distrustful of these men in power: "I chat to him bad like some bush naigger and ask dumb question like, 'So everybody in America have gun? What kinda bullet American fire? Why you don't transfer Dirty Harry to the Jamaica Branch? Hee hee hee" (James 44). Yet, most of his interior monologues are in Standard English, a form he prefers because he is looking for social advancement for himself and his children. Josey Wales's 'language games,' to use Vizenor's term, not only demonstrates his wit and cunning guile, but it also highlights how the novel challenges oppressive Western forces intent on maintaining colonial control through subversive and violent means.

'Natural Mystic': Alternative Spiritualities as Survivance

Alternative spiritualities rooted in cultural traditions remain a common trope in the literature of the region, and James's exploration of this motif further reflects the socio-political and historical context that shapes the narrative. A black consciousness developed in the 1960s worldwide due to civil unrest, and Jamaica was no exception. As Rachel Mordecai states, "an Afrocentric conception of Jamaican identity continued to flourish in the 1960s, in no small part due to the influence of Rastafari in poor urban communities" (10). Rastafari gained prominence during this period, primarily through the popularisation of reggae music, and "for many years, the Jamaican government and its supporters viewed the Rastafarians and Jamaica's popular music as threats to national security" (King 1).

With its roots in folk culture, Rastafari has a lengthy problematic history in Jamaica. Deemed a dangerous cult, the movement experienced extreme violence and alienation from Jamaican society since the 1930s. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Rastafari families were evicted from lands, their homes destroyed and they were arrested, beaten and even killed by police (Harrison Henry, "Rastas beaten…"). The violence at Coral Gardens in April 1963 — due to a land dispute between a gas station owner and a group of bearded men — is one of the best-documented incidents between the Rastafari and law enforcement. While reports are conflicting with regard to who initiated the attack, the resultant 8 deaths and injuries to hundreds (Harrison Henry, "Rastas beaten…") played a pivotal role in the society's negative perception of Rastafari. However, Bob Marley's international success significantly changed the public perception of the group, at home and abroad, as "slick tourist promotional materials to airline commercials, the enchanting sounds of reggae and the image of a smiling 'Rastaman' beckon tourists from around the world to Jamaica's tourist areas" (King 1).

As King posits, "the Rastafarian movement openly denounced British colonial rule in Jamaica" (1), and despite its different mansions, Rastafari doctrines focused on an acknowledgement of the African ancestral past, denied under European colonisation, and as such, produced a positive revisioning of Blackness that had never been experienced. These tenets were documented in a report produced in 1960 by three staff members of the then University College of the West Indies (U.C.W.I), in an attempt to bridge the divide between the Rastafarian community and the wider Jamaican society:

> The basic doctrines common to all brethren, whatsoever the degree to which they have been individually alienated from Jamaican society, can now be set out.
>
> 1. Ras Tafari is the Living God.
> 2. Ethiopia is the black man's home.

3. Repatriation is the way of redemption for black men. It has been foretold, and will occur shortly.
4. The ways of the white man are evil, especially for the black. (Smith, Augier and Nettleford 24)

Rastafarians were demonised for their personal appearance (beards and dreadlocks), their desire for repatriation to their spiritual homeland Africa, and their frequent use of marijuana, (which is intimately connected to their appreciation of nature and 'livity') was heavily penalised. Livity is simply defined as "The Rastafarian way of life" (Oxford Living Dictionaries). It is a belief in righteous living, and that the spiritual energy of God (Jah) resides in all of us.

This concept of 'livity' can be characterised as a form of survivance in James's novel. Narratives of survivance demonstrate a similar connection to nature or "natural estates", and according to Vizenor:

> Native stories of survivance are prompted by natural reason, by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world, by the turn of the seasons, by sudden storms, by migration of cranes, by the ventures of tender lady's slippers, by chance of moths overnight, by unruly mosquitoes, and by the favour of spirits in the water, rimy, sumac, wild rice, thunder in the ice, bear, beaver and faces in the stone. (*Survivance* 11)

Vizenor cautions against interpreting this connection with nature as a "mere romance" (*Survivance* 11), arguing that Indigenous peoples' connection to the land transcends Western ideas of property and ownership; it is a spiritual connection which demonstrates an acknowledgment of and respect for the natural environment and all its inhabitants who existed peacefully before colonisation. Vizenor further contends that Native artists (literary, visual, etc.) celebrate the beauty of nature and the omniscience of God in creation in their different works. Such a connection with the natural environment and animals is important to Native culture, which has been denied presence in colonial accounts of Native life.

In *A Brief History*, livity, as an example of alternative spiritualities, is embodied in the figure of The Singer, (whom James makes nameless because he wants him to be symbolic), through his desire for peace and social equality, reflected in his music, philanthropic work and the philosophies of Rastafari. As Jeff Sparrow notes:

> More than anyone, Marley brought Rastafari from the margins of society to the centre, so that a movement once regarded by respectable Jamaica as an apocalyptic criminal cult became one of the most identifiable products of the island. That popularisation happened because of a songwriting genius that universalised the doctrines of what had previously seemed an extraordinarily specific (even eccentric) religion. Through Marley's songs, people around the world grasped their own situation via Rastafarian rhetoric, as opposed to the more familiar experience of those in the Third World understanding themselves in American terms. ("If it no go so…")

It is this rhetoric, imbued with the principles of livity, which The Singer shares with Papa-Lo. Josey Wales blames Papa-Lo's recent 'softness' on his association with the Singer, observing that he

"is not the same man since he start to think" (James 133). But Papa-Lo's friendship with The Singer, through his understanding of Rastafari, reveals that only the poor are suffering from the continued violence, while the rich remain in positions of power. The Singer was seen as a threat, to the CIA and to the politicians, because his philosophies of universal love and peace were widespread and had the potential to end the violence between the rival gangs. Papa-Lo's confrontation with Josey Wales is informed by The Singer's teachings: he is determined to deal with Josey through reasoning, rather than violence:

> I want to leave him house with me and him of the same mind. Nice and decent people, the Rastafarian show me the way. The first way Babylon fool we is to get we to think we have future in the Babylon shitstem. And me tired of that and Shotta Sherrif tired of that and the Singer tired of that. Every time me go to the Singer house and me see that man from Copenhagen City and man from the Eight Lanes can par and reason, I just start to think that a triangle have three side, but everybody always only look at two. (James 216)

Other examples of alternative spiritualities associated with the folk culture of Rastafari include aspects of the supernatural and magical realism, which recur throughout the novel. Papa-Lo's narration of his violent murder in a police shootout is a literal out-of-body experience, he relays his death as his spirit leaves his body and looks on at the carnage. It highlights the corruption and police brutality common during the period — no judge or jury is present, simply death by execution. The narration is especially haunting: it creatively demonstrates the separation of the spirit from the body through James's lack of punctuation:

> … and this one aim for me neck pow and this one aim for me kneecap pow and this one aim for me balls pow and how come no car passing no car but police them block the road from far off they knew me was coming and Trevor face eat off and Lloyd chest and belly burst open and my head split open and me heart still pumping and another policeman stoop down and say this is for Sebert and fire straight through the heart and the heart burst and dead then he get up and go back to him car and the other policeman go back to them car and me rising higher and higher but me still on the road and I can see them all in a line the police cars they leave me and they driving with they sirens on so people shift out of the way and they drive as one animal a siren snake all the way up to the block that have the Minister of Security office and they circle the block 'round and 'round and 'round all the while laughing loud and me can see every around and above and below. (James 361)

Similarly, the capture and murder of two of the gunmen involved in the attempted assassination of The Singer also demonstrates supernatural tropes with Demus hanged by "eerie white-clad Rastas", and Bam-Bam "seeing duppies among the crowds watching Marley's defiant performance at the concert when Josey's men catch up with him" (Tayler, "Goings-on in Tivoli Gardens"). Bam-Bam, the orphan turned gangster, is subsequently buried alive, gasping for breath, while childhood memories punctuate his final moments:

> Jesus! Jeeeees one breath breath breath 1 breath 2 breath 3 breathe 4 breathe breath breathe fi fi fi fi fiiiiiiiiiiiiive breath six breath se se se se sevennnnnnnneight br nnnnnnnn huhhhhhuhhhuh hhuh hhuhh breeeeeeeeeeehuh huh huh hh hhh hhhhhh h h h h h h nine! Niiiiiiiiine nuhhhh nuhhhhhhhh nuhhhh huhhhh hhhhhh hhhh h h hhhh h daddy no not the yellow fire engine the red one the yellow one can't be real daddy no daddy I

> want a kisko pop and and a lollipop and a tootsie pop and all kinda pop and a purple crayon and a red too pink no pink is for girls pink is for girls HubbaBubba chewing gum don't stick even when you blow a big big bubble biggest and bubblest ring around the rosie pocket full of posie aw shucks aw shucks we — (James 269).

The murdered ghost of Sir Arthur George Jennings, bookends certain sections of the narrative, and, like a one-man chorus of a Greek tragedy, foreshadows the death of several characters. James notes his love for Greek tragedy because of the complexity of its characters: "I think the Greeks were the only people ever to nail character. Their heroes are deeply flawed. They murder, they rape, they kill children" (Harvey "Marlon James interview"). Such flawed characters exist throughout *A Brief History*, and many of them see Jennings before they die, reinscribing the significance of the supernatural in the narrative. The dead continue to talk, while the living refuse to listen, until it is too late, and I suggest that this is a metaphor for the state of the society: it continues to be ravaged by uncompromising violence, while those in positions of power not only profit from the terror which marked the period, but do nothing to prevent further devastation.

Complexity informs any reading of *A Brief History*, but its strength lies in its raw and unflinching ability to testify to those uncomfortable truths, through culture-specific narrative techniques that relay the experiences of the historically marginalised. This re-reading of this novel through a discourse exclusively used in Native American art and literature more appropriately describes the traumatic legacy of colonisation, which continues to affect the Caribbean region, years after independence. I see novelists like James as having two main social responsibilities: deconstructing the myth of paradise and revealing the real social and political problems that continue to plague the region, (like his literary predecessors) and resisting the misconception that in order to create (in this case write) it must come from one's experience exclusively. James's work to date surpasses this simplistic and limiting concept of the writer, as he remains committed to telling a story greater than his own.

Notes

[1] To name a few, see V.S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* (1962), Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988) and Olive Senior's "Meditation on Yellow" in *Gardening in the Tropics* (2005).

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