

## I Dreamt I Was a Rasta: The Struggle for Self-Determination in Mathare

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“Though the battle might seem so big,  
Jah is fighting for we.  
Is fighting for me!  
See the shadows in dark ages,  
Take my soul and set me free.  
Jah love me, Jah love me.”

What can and must self-determination mean in the twenty-first century? This is a question that has oriented my inquiry ever since my encounter with the Kurdish Freedom Movement, at least, and perhaps especially with the impressive re-articulation, re-elaboration, re-definition of the concept and principle expressed and achieved by the movement's leader and inspiration, Abdullah Öcalan, penned from his lonely prison cell on Imrali Island.

The paradigm of social ecology, and the political program of democratic confederalism, that Öcalan has adopted and adapted, and that the movement has sought to put into practice, promises an alternative to the catastrophic combination of planetary plutocracy, never-ending war and ever-intensifying climate emergency, wrought by the rhythms of capitalist modernity.

But if it is to deliver on this promise, then the paradigm and program must spread, and quickly. How to engage, and help propel forward, the struggle to combat unjust and illegitimate hierarchy in all its forms? A multiplicity of tactics must proliferate, no doubt. There cannot and should not be but one answer for such a monumental quest and question. Be that as it may, I set my sights on Mathare, in the very city where Öcalan was abducted.

Frantz Fanon famously defined decolonization as nothing less than the realization of the dictum that the last shall be first. So let us seek out the last, in fulfilment of the imperative to struggle alongside them.

The wretched of the earth are rising, once more. As Bob Marley predicted, per chance, by the power of the Most High, they keep on resurfacing.

There they are, struggling for self-determination, day by day, night by night, right in the heart of Mathare, Nairobi, Kenya, Africa. An informal settlement, say some, a ghetto, a slum. However you feel least uncomfortable calling the location, the fact remains, it is one of the most densely populated places on the planet. And it is characterized by severe deprivation – in terms of access to clean water, to sanitation, to adequate housing, to health clinics, to roads, to schools. The basics: you name it, they need it. They are fighting, they are dying, in droves. Though some are surviving, somehow. They are up against the merciless logic of capital, in lock step with a brutal, post-colonial state. According to whom, they are but surplus, to be constricted, confined, and controlled. And so are subjected to periodic forced evictions and systemic extra-judicial police murders.

The place has a history, of course. It is where the Mau Mau once roamed, their headquarters in Nairobi, during the colonial “emergency.” And it is located on the site of an old quarry, from which stones were extracted to build the city's distinctive

colonial-era buildings. A legacy of freedom struggle, in a landscape scarred by extraction, these are but different dimensions of the local heritage. For over a century, at least, the dynamics of construction and destruction, of oppression and resistance, have thus here been intimately, indeed dialectically, intertwined.

Just off Juja Road, across the way from the Moi air base, can be found the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC). It was founded in 2014, by a group of committed community youths, who came together to create a space conceived for the purpose of “promot[ing] more participatory forms of justice.” On their website, they explain: “For years Mathare has been a place where much violence has been allowed to go on without any redress for the community, especially as most continue to live in fear of the consequences of standing up for their rights. These forms of structural violence include, but are not limited to, land grabbing, forced evictions, police abuse and extrajudicial killings, political impunity, and other economic, social, and psychological violations.” In response to such structural violence, the MSJC was formed, to propagate a vision of a Mathare without human rights violations, and with a mission, to fight for social justice, through engaged community and social movement platforms.”

The MSJC is at the nucleus of a burgeoning network of some 30 social justice centres that have sprung up around Kenya in the past few years, a group of confederated grassroots organizations dedicated to the principles of community mobilization and self-organization, committed to the struggle against human rights abuses and for people power and participatory justice.

Close to six decades have passed since Kenya obtained its independence. Yet for the inhabitants of Mathare, freedom remains but another word for nothing left to lose. Mathare is a site and symbol of structural and state violence, a space where the wretched of the earth dwell. Both the colonial and the anti-colonial legacies live on in this subaltern space. The former, perhaps most emblematically, in the guise of the police force, which was first constituted as a tool of the colonial administration and was heavily implicated in the attempt to eradicate the Mau Mau rebellion, and which today continues to terrorise the inhabitants of Mathare. So too does the anti-colonial legacy survive. The flame lit by the freedom fighters who once inhabited this space has yet to be extinguished.

This essay will bear witness to the experiences and perspectives of today's freedom fighters in Mathare, of people still engaged in the struggle for self-determination, and who find themselves up against the cruel logic of capital and the obscene hostility of the post-colonial state.

In 2017, the MSJC would publish an important document, titled “Who Is Next? A Participatory Action Research Report Against the Normalization of Extrajudicial Executions in Mathare.” The document begins with a rehearsal and expression of collective memory, a revindication of a rich history rife with resistance and struggle. Next to an image of the valley, replete with dilapidated, cramped, and makeshift housing, row upon row of shanties made of old tin and mud, under a blue sky, dotted with clouds, the report commences thus:

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"We are coming to about one hundred years of Mathare's existence. Today's settlement of approximately 250,000 people crammed into three square kilometres was originally a quarry, whose valley provided rock used to build Nairobi's characteristic colonial-era stone buildings. It was settled initially by the quarry's African labour, mainly in the cave dwellings that resulted from the excised rock. Then, slowly by slowly, particularly after the Second World War, and especially the independence era, people began to build homes, though ones deemed and still deemed 'illegal' in the segregated (post-)colonial city. Mathare has been witness to many wars, occupations, and forced evictions; many everyday struggles for basic services, dignity, and freedom. It was, after all, part of an area referred to as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army's ('Mau Mau') headquarters in Nairobi during the colonial 'emergency' period; forming its pulse, and for which the settlement paid the heavy price of being raised to the ground" (p.7).

The report goes on to give details about the cases of some 50 extrajudicial executions that took place between 2013 and 2015 in Mathare, and also documents in an appendix fully 803 such cases covered in the Kenyan press during the same period. The MSJC poses the difficult question: "Why have these extrajudicial killings become accepted as 'normalized' common everyday events in Kenya?" (p.8). It, furthermore, makes clear that, "[f]or us this register of young victims is not separate from a larger fight for rights for all: land for the landless, food for the poor, houses, education, healthcare, and ... security of tenure" (p.9). It then pays tribute to the inhabitants of other informal settlements as well, by insisting, in framing the purpose of the report as follows: "This is a humble commemoration of our community members and their mothers who live with so much pain in their breasts, their pain is not a lie. This is for Dandora, Kibera, Mukuru, Biafra, Ziwani, Eastleigh, Mombasa." It contrasts these notorious names with those of Nairobi's wealthy neighbourhoods, by continuing: "It should not be illegal to be young and poor in any of our homes. After all, we are human too, humans don't just exist in Muthaiga, Runda, and Karen, we are also humans in Mathare." This before concluding, emphatically: "We will not keep asking: who is next?" (p.10).

Nor is this the only powerful such report prepared by the MSJC over the past few years. In 2019, it would publish an equally moving report, titled "Maji ni uhai, Maji ni haki (Water is life, Water is a right). Eastland Residents Demand Their Right to Water. A Participatory Report." Here the group would call attention to the critical issue of the lack of clean running water in and around Mathare and in similar informal settlements. This report begins, again, by reciting a series of neighbourhood names: "[i]n our neighbourhoods in Mathare, Kayole, Dandora, Kariobangi, Mukuru, Githurai, Ruai, Tena, Umoja and elsewhere, water provision costs more, is less safe, and is less consistent than in other richer parts of the city" (p.4). It proceeds by explaining that "[b]y being marked as 'informal', and intentionally maintained like this, our home areas, particularly those called 'slums', are largely neglected by government through the denial of basic rights and infrastructure." In this vein, it continues, "[e]ven though, for example, Mathare has been around for close to 100 years, there is still no sufficient piped water infrastructure, or adequate housing and sanitation provisions" (p.4).

The report cites a 2005 article by Gulyani et. al. to buttress the claim that though "70% of Nairobi's residents live within informal settlements, only 20% of these residents have access to piped water, leaving them to rely on private suppliers, many of whom are involved in powerful water cartels" (p.5). As a result of this desperate situation of clean water scarcity, the incidence of cholera in these neighbourhoods increases in the rainy season. And the report is in fact dedicated to all the residents of Eastlands who have died of this thoroughly avoidable disease. "No one should die from drinking a cup of water" (p.2), the MSJC convincingly contends.

The report goes on to include personal testimonies of Eastlands residents, who recount, among other things, their travails in the pursuit of access to clean water. "There have been many times that I have had to choose between washing my baby and cooking" (p.14), one mother explained. Another resident told of the death of his cousin at the age of 18 from cholera, before articulating the demand: "A lot has to be done, and it has to be done with urgency. The community has to be allowed to participate in informing government projects so as to eradicate illegal connections and avail adequate and safe drinking water to the people" (p.11).

The report concludes with a list of some ten concrete demands, among them, that water be distributed "according to population density and not according to wealth," and also, significantly, that "[a]ll water bodies should have at least three representatives from poor urban settlements on their board," and that "[t]hese should include a woman, a community activist, and a person with a disability chosen by the community" (p.34). The demands thus go beyond the mere call for the provision of a basic need by the government, to address the very principle of distribution of needs, calling for a democratic rather than a capitalistic logic to prevail, and for democratic inclusion in the bodies that make decisions about the provision and distribution of water.

The testimonials included in the report, as well as the demand for democratic empowerment of the community, reflect the basic orientation of the MSJC as a consciously grassroots movement, which defines itself, at least in part, in opposition to the Non-Governmental Organizations which constitute an essential component of governance and governmentality in a place like Mathare. Indeed, according to Gacheke Gachihi, one of the founders of the MSJC, "NGOs reappropriate state and neoliberal mechanisms within their work, requiring that independent social movements ... challenge their position" (2014, p.14).

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Gacheke Gachihi arrived in Mathare in the early nineties, as a child, after his family was displaced from the Rift Valley, as a result of the ethnic violence that took place in the aftermath of the 1992 general election. Gacheke is Kikuyu, his ancestors had been settled in the 1920s in the Rift Valley. His grandfather was first a farmworker for British settlers, and subsequently, after what Gacheke refers to as "flag independence," in 1963, came to be employed in the Sorget forest, in Londiani. Gacheke was born there in the early eighties, and as such, was exposed throughout his early childhood to bitter rural poverty, to the struggle to survive, on a small farm, or shamba. His family would be evicted from this property in 1988, by the Moi regime, as part of its efforts to suppress the so-called Mwakenya – December Twelve underground political movement, a movement which had been mobilizing forest dwellers, workers, and small peasant cultivators for a possible guerrilla campaign against the dictatorship. After their eviction, another grandfather of his, who had fought with the Mau Mau, and who was a firm believer in education, managed to get Gacheke enrolled in school. While Gacheke was at school, his mother gained employment in a timber saw mill, a situation which lasted until the onset of ethnic clashes between Kalenjin and Kikuyu in the early 90's, when his family was forced to flee, first to Molo, and later, to Nairobi.

It was difficult for Gacheke to adapt to urban street life. Soon he was arrested, charged for loitering under the colonial-era Vagrant Act, and taken to a juvenile home, before being picked up by the Watoto wa Lwanga (Street Children) Rehabilitation Centre, who brought him to a community centre in Mathare, where, in 1993, he would become a student in the Valley Bridge primary school. He also took up work in the evenings, at the Huruma Car Wash, where he cleaned matatus for ten schillings

per bus, barely enough for food and clothing, and was exposed first-hand to the indignities and structural violence of the neoliberal economy. The police would frequent the car wash, to collect "taxes" – that is, bribes. Those who refused to part ways with their hard-earned cash would have their washing buckets broken, and would be subjected to various forms of police brutality. While there, the police officers would demand free washes for their patrol cars, which were on many occasions stained with the blood of victims of police killings.

Police killings and police violence were on the rise in those times, and Gacheke felt compelled to resist. At the age of fourteen, he began pinning posters on the wall at the Huruma Car Wash, objecting to the systematic harassment and extortion by the police that he and his fellow car washers faced. Thus began his career as a grass roots "activist," of sorts, and between 1994 and 2000, he would become ever-more involved in the pro-democracy movement. He immersed himself in the political education groups that went with it, and soon distinguished himself as a pillar of his community, one of the few who was not afraid to speak out against the many cases of human rights violations that took place, and that continue to occur.

Gacheke is imbued, through and through, with the principle of hope. He likes to quote Howard Zinn, who once wrote: "If you look back at the development of social movements in history, what do you find? You find that they start with hopelessness. They start with small groups of people meeting, acting in their local communities and looking at the enormous power of government or enormous power of corporations and thinking, we don't have a chance. There is nothing we can do. And then what you find at certain points of history is that these small movements become larger ones, they grow, they grow. There's a kind of electronic vibration that moves across from one to the other. This is how the civil rights movement developed. It developed out of the smallest of actions taken in the communities – in Greensboro, North Carolina or Albany, Georgia- and moved and moved and grew until it became a force that the national government had to recognize. And we've seen this again and again, so at an early point in the development of a movement things look hopeless and if you are so intimidated by the hopelessness that you don't act then those small groups will never become larger ones" (Zinn, 2006: 74).



By the time I first met Gacheke, in Cambridge, in May of 2018, he was already something of a legend. He had come to Cambridge at the invitation of Dr. Adam Branch, a lecturer in POLIS, who had organised a workshop on activism in East

Africa. After the workshop, Adam gave Gacheke a tour of the campus, where by fortune our paths crossed, just outside of the Old Schools, where I and a group of about 50 student activists from the University's divest from fossil fuels campaign, Zero Carbon, had assembled for a rally to demand accountability from the University administration and an end to University complicity in the unfolding ecocide. Gacheke and I immediately hit it off. We spoke about the importance of the student-led initiative in favour of climate justice, about the links between the struggle in Cambridge and the struggle of the people in the ghettos of Nairobi, and about the excellent book by Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, that he happened to be carrying on him. When I told him that I was planning on being in Nairobi in the Summer, he implored me that I must come visit the MSJC to see what they were up to.

Flash forward a couple months, to July of 2018, and there I was. The taxi dropped us off at a petrol station, just across the way from the MSJC. Sophie and Johanna had both grown up in urban centres all around Africa, and so were somehow used to situations like this. But not me. This was my first encounter, up close, face to face, with the people who populate a Nairobi "slum." I was unprepared.

At the time, the Kenyan periodicals were abuzz with the details surrounding, and likely consequences of, a simple gesture, a handshake, between President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga. A truce. And in Mathare, which is among many other things, a frontline in the political battles that pit Kikuyu against Luo, there was a tangible sense of relief. Tensions so recently, once again, simmering, now notably more relaxed, inter-ethnic relations much improved. Or so I was soon to learn.

I came to Mathare, already on the edge, of losing my job, of losing my wife, of losing the last remnants of my sanity. Apocalyptic images invaded my mind, crowding out all calmer, more coherent, lines of inquiry and reflection. A sense of inchoate urgency had overcome me.

It was in such circumstances that I first stepped foot in Mathare. An emblematic space. But paradoxically, perhaps, a place that seemed to me to be teeming with resilience, with hope.

We had barely stepped out of our taxi when we were confronted by a group of heavily armed police officers, from an 'anti-terror' unit, on patrol in the neighbourhood. Agents of state violence, in the flesh. They wanted to know what we were doing in the area. One of them stepped right up into Johanna's face. But she held her ground, she didn't flinch. We told them we were here to meet with the people from the social justice centre, that they were planting trees somewhere not too far away, and that they had indicated they would send someone to fetch us.

Just then, Jah Driver appeared on the scene. Sporting the red, gold, and green. He exchanged some words in Shang with the police officers, whom he appeared to know, and they immediately backed down. He then motioned to us, and said, "Come with me." Down into the depths of the ghetto together we descended.

Thus commenced my exposure and immersion into the activities of the MSJC. Having worked closely over the previous few years with international solidarity initiatives for the Kurdish Freedom Movement and with the Freedom for Öcalan campaign, I immediately recognised a close affinity between the MSJC's orientation and the project of democratic confederalism. For the MSJC espouses a grass roots approach to democratic empowerment; it is a prefigurative movement that seeks to embody in its praxis, in its everyday struggles, the goal of self-determination.



The MSJC had managed to attract into its orbit a core group of committed Rastafarians, Jah Driver being a charismatic personality among them. I soon got to know them, and him, quite well.

Jah Driver was born in Mathare, back in the early eighties. He says he can remember when the water in the river was still crystal clear. Now it is so murky, so polluted. And so many of his age mates are already six feet underground. But not "Marley." He is a survivor, a man who fears the Lord. He always keeps the Sabbath, and swears he tries scrupulously to abide by the Ten Commandments. The ganja is for him a holy sacrament. It helps him commune with the Most High, I and I. He is convinced he is a prophet. Perhaps he is right. Who can prove him wrong?

Down on Mau Mau road, where his mother has a stall – she sells vegetables – the adolescents and little kids seem to flock to him. "Big up, rasta!" "Irie, man." He grins. "This is my territory," he informs me with pride.

He is thin, too thin, nearly emaciated, from a diet of steady poverty. Though he is not tall, somehow his lankiness makes him appear so, at least when he stands alone. He takes close care of his appearance, is quick to wipe the dust from the pavementless streets and back alleys off his leather boots. He makes an effort to wear the red, gold, and green as frequently as possible.

His beard, still too short to flow, though curly, accentuates a certain sense of sharpness to his jaw. His smile is infectious, and his caramel-colored eyes, glazed over, yet intense. He almost always hides his long locks underneath a large beige cap.

In his voice can be detected resilience, determination, mixed with more than a hint of desolation. Searching for a way out of crushing circumstances. Sometimes just trying to find an escape for himself and his family. Other times stepping up to advocate for the community more generally, to cry out against the systemic injustices in which they are mired. The Babylon system, he likes to say, is a vampire, quoting his hero, Bob Marley. His deeply felt spiritual convictions seem to protect him from outright despair.

They sometimes call him Jah Driver, because of his profession; for he is a man who makes the rounds every day on the matatus. Up and down Juja Road, from Dandora down to the city centre. In the hustle and bustle, amidst the cacophony, the orderly chaos of the Nairobi crowds. A life-line connecting the ghetto communities, from Dandora, through Mathare, on to Eastleigh, crossing so many invisible thresholds along the way. Bringing the urban masses to and from their jobs as servants. Up at 3:30, well before the sun rises, never finished until nearly 11 at night. Usiko to usiko. In the struggle to make ends meet.



The reggae music blasts in the back of his matatu – which is, of course, not, strictly speaking, his. He rents it out, for a daily fee. His passengers seem to like and respect his vibe. It is they who first christened him, Jah Driver.

Others in the ghetto call him Marley. But he likes to think of himself as Moses, most improbably destined to lead his people out of slavery, and into a Promised Land.

A couple of weeks after our first encounter ... we made our way down to the den, through a maze of makeshift habitations, descending from the throat into the bowels of the ghetto, over sometimes perilous terrain. The stench of open sewage, flowing past the tin huts and tents, towards the river below. Just across the way is a place called Kosovo, named after another conflict zone and human tragedy, on the other side of the world. I was something of a novelty in their midst, though they had seen my kind before. The folks from Peace Brigades International, or Amnesty, some of the interns at the MSJC, often looked and even sounded quite a lot like me. And yet, they swore, I seemed somehow different from the rest. The manic energy, the delusions of grandeur, that queer glimpse in the eye, together served to distinguish me. The fact that they recognised me as unique, or that they feigned to do so at the very least, I found extremely flattering. For I had been fleeing from the curse of normality for most of my adult life, if not from late adolescence.

Into the den I was delivered. A paraplegic who I recognised from the MSJC, who goes by the name of John, had propped himself up on the seat in the corner, by the entrance. Next to him sat a young man with short dreads, rolling rather robust joints. The place was crowded, there was barely enough room for us to sit. About a dozen of us huddled around a table, most patiently waiting our turns for a puff-puff-pass. Across from John, up on the wall, was perched a television, from which Hollywood action films beamed.

It felt like a lucid dream. There were several joints making the rounds. And with each hit I took, I became ever more confident that I had been sent here on a mission. That I was at last among my people. That an ancient prophecy was about to be fulfilled. But there was a nagging sense as well that I was perhaps trespassing. That I had lost myself somewhere along the way to the den, that I had never been further out of my element.

Either way, I was there now. Jah Driver wanted to tell me his story, and I was ready and willing to listen. So I pulled out my tape recorder, and began to record.

"Greetings in the name of His Majesty, the Emperor Hailie Sellassie Eye, the First, Jah, Rasta Fari! My name, Jah Driver. Also you can call me Moses. From Mathare, Kenya. I joined the movement of Mathare Social Justice Centre ... recently, it was launched in 2014, so I was emotionally, spiritually there, but I had not joined there physically. But in 2017, last year, I joined the movement through a program which is called Mathare Green Movement. And through the rights and justice, the injustices that have been happening here in Mathare Valley, a lot of ghetto youths are being shot and there is no justice. So we thought that the movement was going to be effective through grass roots, you know? That's why we joined the movement."

"So the ghetto youth are dying," I said, echoing his sentiment.

He nodded, and continued: "[Y]ou know, it's sad when my classmates, my age mates, most of them, them dead, out of gunshots, and related to gun wounds. Dead, you know? So, most of them, we buried them in [the] cemetery here, in Nairobi ... We are talking about ... injustices that have been happening here in Mathare. So the movement inspired a lot of youths ... Mathare Social Justice is a platform for us to speak our voices ..."

The conversation would last for hours. He had a lot to get off his chest. He told me about his father, who was a construction worker, and an alcoholic. A man who never treated his family

right. Whenever he would come into money, he would disappear. Whenever he was broke, he would reappear. They had a little mud hut for a house, and his father had this bad habit of coming home late at night, drunk, and kicking down the makeshift door. Jah Driver recounted how he still remembers most vividly trying to fix that door, so many times, in the mornings, as a little boy, before heading off to school. Despite it all, his father was a hero to him, an icon. And so, when his father finally left home for good – it was after a big fight, the Court had to intervene – Jah Driver was just nine, he was thoroughly distraught, his young world came crashing down.

After that fateful night, his mother was forced to go it alone, to raise seven children as a single mom. She sold vegetables and greens, mboga, down on Mau Mau Road. Struggled to make ends meet. While, for his part, Jah Driver struggled to understand how the system could conspire to keep him and his father apart. He never saw him again for years.

He was searching for another hero. At first he thought he found one in the evangelical pastor who was the head of his school. But soon enough, he came to feel let down by this man. For the guy kept trying to hit up his mother for cash, which, he felt, just wasn't right. "The impastor," he called him. "You should preach what you practice," he remarked, "and practice what you preach."

It was this search for a new hero, for a god, indeed, a mighty god in a living man, that led him, eventually, to embrace Rastafarianism, he would conclude, quite confidently. He searched all around, but nowhere else found the followers of any other creed who lived so coherently, in accordance with what they claimed to believe. But with the Rastas it was different, he insisted. Their "livity" seemed to him most authentic, consistently consequential, they were the real deal. And so, as a young man, he grew the dreadlocks, and took up the lifestyle.

He, furthermore, contended that there is a tight connection between the "livity" of Rastafarianism and the legacy of the Mau Mau. When I asked him to explain, his eyes lit up with excitement, and he was quick to exclaim: "Rastafarian and the Mau Mau are the same thing, because, you know, they are the same!" He claimed that his great grandfather had fought with the Mau Mau, that they were fighting for freedom, for freedom from oppression, back in the day, and that the Rastas are committed to the struggle for freedom from oppression today.

Which is also what brought him to first step foot in the Mathare Social Justice Centre. "We need to stand up for our rights, you know, 500,000 people, living like this." He was emphatic that he stands with the MSJC because it is embracing the voices, amplifying the voices, of the downtrodden, of the oppressed. "My great grandfather fought the colonial government, so that I could enjoy freedom from it. But this freedom, it's not effective. We here in Mathare are still downpressed ... The elite, the poor, you see, the gap is so big, man. And here, people struggle. They live under a dollar per day. And you can sleep even hungry." By contrast, "the elite, they are driving Mercedes Benzes and expensive luxury life, and I and I poor man still suffering, to bring the children together. Because it's painful to see, when you drinking tea at the MSJC office outside, and here comes a child who's got nothing, with a running nose, no? We want to bring change. Things have got to change. The prophecies, they are unfolding, before our very eyes, they must be fulfilled."

He wanted to show me around Mathare, and was especially keen on taking me to the spot that the police had once used as a firing range. He recounted what it was like to be sitting in class, listening to all the gunshots, as a kid. After school, he and his friends would run over to find the bullets that had been fired, collect them, get them melted down over in the alcohol brewing place, and make away at the end of the day with maybe 40 schillings or so. The sun was shining particularly bright at this peculiar landmark when we arrived. The gunshot marks were still

visible in the protruding rock, and they seemed to have a powerful symbolic significance for him. He told me: "It used to be that way, we would hear so many gunshots every day, because the police would always be practicing right here. Just imagine being a kid, and trying to concentrate in school, with all the noise from the shooting in the background. Not like now. For the most part, the valley is silent these days. We still hear gunshots sometimes, though. But now, when we hear a gunshot ring out, we know that someone has been targeted."

He continued with story after story, as we made our way back towards Juja Road. He told me about how Dedan Kimathi's grandson had chained himself to the statue of his legendary grandfather, on the corner of Kimathi Street and Mama Ngina Street, right in the center of Nairobi, to make the point that Kenyans are still not free. "Kimathi lives," he explained. "We are the descendants of the Mau Mau, we have inherited their struggle."

Dusk was quickly approaching by the time we arrived at Juja Road. And the streets of Mathare, if you can call them that, seemed evermore alive, in motion, as the sunlight faded into night. Suddenly, a woman emerged from the crowd, she approached me quickly, and defiantly, she seemed drunk, she was aggressive. I shied away, stepped back behind Jah Driver. She called out to me, "Can you greet me?" I was stunned. "Can you greet me?" she repeated, and looked me squarely in the eye, as she further inquired: "Can you remember me? Will you remember me?" I can never forget her now.

Auntie Rhoda had gone to boarding school with my mother-in-law, out in Limuru, back in the waning days of the colonial era, when there was no national border separating Kenya from Tanganyika. Both belonged to Britain's East African possessions, ever since the end of the First World War, when Germany was forced to surrender. Rhoda came from Luo country, her father was a pastor. He had travelled to the States in the early sixties – among the same cohort with the elder Obama – and so had tasted twice first-hand the bitter fruit of racial segregation. The double standards he could not stand. Upon his return to Nairobi, the church offered him a place in Eastleigh. But why should he be forced to live in Eastleigh, when the white pastors got to live in Lavington? No, Eastleigh was not for him. Lavington is where he would come to reside – on a big compound, in a big house, indeed, nearly a mansion. To him, this is what racial equality demanded.

A space for the emergent African middle class, or dare I say, bourgeoisie. Decades, almost a lifetime later, and he had moved back to the countryside, out by Lake Victoria, to convalesce, in anticipation of his day of judgment, a day which was swiftly approaching. Auntie Rhoda was now managing the estate in Lavington, she had converted it into a high-end B & B. Which is how we came to stay there – for a price pretty much equivalent to our rent back in Cambridge. No matter; we could afford it. Right next to the Lavington Mall, which was for me a definite perk, since the mall housed East Africa's only Bikram Yoga Studio. So far away, yet so close to home. A place of worship for someone with my own California-inflected post-modern sensibilities, no doubt.

The day I first interviewed Jah Driver, deep in the bowels of Mathare, he insisted on escorting me back home. First in a matatu down Juja Road back to the city centre, and then from there in a taxi up to Lavington. We had a beer and some chips in a spot in the Lavington mall, at a price that equalled perhaps a few days' wages for someone from the ghetto, if not more, then walked on over to the compound. We smoked a joint just out in front, to the security guard's shock and dismay, then mosed on in unannounced. The plan was to hail Jah Driver a taxi back home.

Both Vivian and Johanna were more than a bit bothered by my sudden surprise appearance, not least because I was

accompanied by the likes of Jah Driver. He sat in the pastor's chair, in the living room, sipped a glass of water, leaned back, and pronounced, "I would like to have a house like this one day."

And he proceeded to tell us how he had lost his first daughter, abducted from the hospital, an infamous case of conspiracy organised by a local pastor, still at large in the UK. He had indeed suffered so much at the hands of the impostors. He, like Rhoda's father, in whose seat he now sat, waited eagerly but patiently for judgment day.

When he left, Johanna was livid. "How could you bring him here unannounced? Why didn't you at least call to let me know when you would be arriving, and that you were alright?" I, of course, could not answer her. It was as if I was possessed with an impulse to test her limits, to pull her strings. Just like I was doing with the University authorities back in Cambridge. Or, as I put it to one of the guys in the den in Mathare, "I've almost lost my job, I've almost lost my wife. Soon I'll have nothing to lose but my chains. I must be doing something right." To which he responded, quite coyly, "Or maybe you must be doing something wrong."

As it turns out, Rhoda's father spent a lot of time in Mathare. He professed a vocation to help – to build schools, to build clinics, to pastor to the people in need. Whatsoever you do to the least of my people. And Jah Driver, his impulse from the vantage point of the pastor's chair in the pastor's big house in Lavington, was not to burn the place down. Not at all. He longed to inherit the place instead.

No wonder I was so obsessed with the postcolonial classic, *Matigari*, penned by a man who had forsaken his Christian name James. Every good and perfect gift comes from on high.

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"I'm worried about Wanjau," Jah Driver recently messaged. "He's gone back to drinking, and to doing his old ninja tricks." It was likely only a matter of time. The vocation for social justice only rarely provides the resources to put food on the table. And Wanjau, he is skilled as a thief. His talents are in high demand. Not to mention, there is a sense of self-worth, of dignity, which comes from avoiding the status of being a charity case, and even standing outside the law. True, he would prefer to be a revolutionary. But better a criminal than a nobody. The last thing he can stand is to be an object of pity. That much you can tell from just one look in his eyes. A flash of anger comes across them so suddenly, whenever the subject of injustice is broached.

I admit I was more than a little afraid of him. He seemed a vessel of divine vengeance, clearly capable of inflicting the wrath of God. I caught a glimpse of it one morning, when we were on our way over to plant some trees. Just as we reached Mau Mau road, we came across a rather violent scene. A drunken man was sprawled out in front of the stall of a local vendor, and she was trying to shoo him away. She took a big wooden plank and started to whack him with it. In an instant, Wanjau sprang into action, delivering a firm, swift kick to the young lady's thigh, which caused her to drop the plank. "She had to be stopped," he later affirmed, with full confidence. No second thoughts, no regrets.

Wanjau had first gotten hooked up with the folks at the MSJC when he was wanted, dead or alive, when he had been targeted as a public enemy, by the police force, who had a way of making good on their lethal threats. The MSJC took up his case, turned him activist, made it much more costly for the cops to lay a finger on him. Got them to stand down, to cease and desist. Gacheke had ever since taken him under his wing, had seen in him the makings of a grass roots, community leader, and sought to cultivate his raw potential, his charisma, to channel his anger towards radical ends. For the community, of course.

But when I first met him, this process of transformation remained

rather far from complete. You could sense the lingering allure of a life as an outlaw in the way that he recounted his old battles, how he remembered his fallen friends. He looked back with more than a touch of romanticism upon the exploits of his former life. When people used to respect him much more than they do now, now that he has no cash he feels sometimes useless, being a social justice warrior doesn't pay.

The very first time I met Wanjau, at the Social Justice Centre, he invited me to his house for tea, to come to meet his wife and his infant daughter. He was open like that, he acted as if he had nothing to hide. He had lost an infant daughter a few years back, and was proud of the new girl's health. His love for her, and for her mother, was most intense. He wanted me to get a glimpse of those who were dearest to him, to thus forge a bond that might prove impossible to break. I turned him down on his offer. There was something about the look in his eye that scared me, that made me fear the faint prospect that he could be luring me into some lurid trap. No, he was not like Gacheke, nor even like Jah Driver. Neither a professional activist, nor a man on a prophetic mission. He had been a criminal, a thug, not so long ago, and his features, his gestures, still showed it. But this aura both frightened and attracted me, even made me think of Flor, and her crowd of friends, who prayed to the spirits of ubanda to watch over them as they roamed the dark streets of Tucumán and Buenos Aires in search of tricks in the early morning hours. Yes, I had come across that gaze before, half way around the world.

The day we met up for our interview, he came by the MSJC, and together we headed over to the den, to toke up before the session. As we sat in that spot, he seemed to be sizing me up, his eyes fixed on me for a long time, like a lion with prey in sight. The thought crossed my mind that he might be weighing up the pros and cons of somehow harming me, before he burst out, in conclusion, "I like you, Professor. Some may think you are crazy, but that's just because you can see so much farther than they. You have wisdom, Professor. I hope to learn a lot from you." I was glad to have passed his scrutiny, and imagined him becoming my lieutenant, my body guard in a revolutionary band. Such were my fantasies, ever so faintly associated with reality. In another life, maybe. As he put it, "Why didn't I meet you before now?"

When I left town, I gave him my UCLA hoodie, which he wore religiously in the aftermath of my departure. A loyalist, he had placed some faith in me.



The Uber drivers would sometimes refuse to take me from Lavington out to Mathare. They told harrowing stories of young men with machetes assaulting them in their vehicles on Juja Road. But in my experience, the cops were the only ones who ever intervened to shake me down. One morning on my way to meet with Wanjau, the car I was in got pulled over at a checkpoint, just before reaching the MSJC. An officer got into



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the back seat and promptly asked to see my passport, which I didn't have on me. He then threatened to take me down to the Pangani police station, saying it was illegal for me to move around without proper identification on my person. The taxi driver pled on my behalf, exchanging words with the officer in Shang. He then relayed to me that the officer was saying it was getting hot out, and he was thirsty, and would like a cold drink. I got the hint, and offered him some cash so he could go and quench his thirst. He accepted, patting his baton on my seatback as he made his way out the car, while muttering, barely audibly, that he guessed he could forgive me just once. I was a little more than relieved, since I had a couple of joints on me, in my front pocket, which, had they been discovered, would have cost me much more than the twenty bucks or so with which I readily parted ways. It certainly was an expensive soda, though, even by Scandinavian standards, much less those of Nairobi.

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"We are tired of being victims," Wanjau complained. "So much police brutality, so many killings, they have to stop." He said he was certain that civic education was the necessary first step, that because people in Mathare don't know their rights, it is all too easy for the police to take advantage. He said he didn't want to see another generation suffer and die as passive victims. He believed the youth needed heroes, and that he, for one, aspired to become one. Indeed, he had always wanted to be a hero. Even back when he was a criminal, what he liked most was how people would look up to him. He was looking for respect.

When he was in prison, people from his neighborhood would come and ask him for advice. The prison guards joked about it, asking him if he was the local MP.

It started when he was little, his quest for dignity. He couldn't stand it when his family went hungry. He remembered telling his big brother, who was by then already immersed in gangster life, "You get rich and get us out of here. Otherwise, I'm going to have to do it myself." When he was nine, he started running errands for the older bad boys, delivering arms or ammunitions or narcotics or stolen goods for them, whatever they needed moved from here to there, in return for some sorely needed cash. He'd buy flour, food, supplies for his mom to cook, and hide it all underneath his bed. Whenever his mom was out of food, he would tell her that he was off to borrow some from a neighbor, and would go and get some from his stash instead.

By the time he was twelve, he had learned how to mug people; he and his friends had formed a crew. All those kids are dead now, all except him. He is the survivor.

There is this priest he knew. He ran into him one night, late at night, early in the morning, in fact. After he and his crew had been out doing their business, robbing some rich folks' houses. He was packing his weapon, a gun, barely concealed. The priest caught sight of him, studied him closely, only to conclude: "You need not worry, for you are blessed, and no matter how many fall among those who surround you, you are destined to stay alive."

And indeed, Wanjau did believe that it was his destiny to survive. Not like his best pal, his partner in crime, the one they called Legion, who seemed possessed by so many devils. Only Wanjau could control him, his anger ran so deep. Shot dead in his teens. They say he called out Wanjau's name three times as he lay dying in the street. He still comes to haunt Wanjau in his dreams.

Or the soldier who used to hang out in the ghetto, with the bad boys. He had been traumatised, on a tour of duty, in Somalia. And came back with an itch to kill or be killed. Which led him to slum it on occasions, undercover, with Wanjau and his crew, where he taught them a thing or two about shooting with precision. Until one day he flipped out, shot his wife, and then turned the gun on himself.

But Wanjau, he had a sixth sense, he could tell when danger was coming. His palms would start to sweat. Whenever that would happen, he knew it was time to get moving. More than once it saved his hide.

That, and his beloved mother, whom he considered one of his best friends. He could confide in her about pretty much anything. Like the time he got picked up and brutally beaten by the cops. They kept him there, in Pangani, for four days, subjecting him to the cruellest of treatment, before they let him see his mom. He told her his gun was hidden underneath his mattress, that she needed to get rid of it as soon as she could, because if the cops ended up finding it, that would be the end of him. She listened quietly, and carefully, and did as he requested. He was convinced she saved his life that day.

Just like he was convinced that the MSJC, and Gacheke in particular, had saved his life again, when the cops took to threatening him on the social media. So many brushes with death. But he feared it not, for he had come to deeply believe what that priest had said to him, that he was indeed blessed, that there was a reason why the Lord wanted him alive, and that had to do with a mission to help deliver divine justice, that he was a conduit for the Lord's wrath.

"My granny told me something," he mentioned to me. "She told me the country needs a second revolution. Why? She sees a lot of poverty, a lot of hunger, disease, yea? Starvation. Which shouldn't occur in a free nation, so why say we are free, yet we are sick, we are poor?"

He took me down by the river that day, so he could introduce me to some more of his friends. The weed was particularly potent, it had my mind whizzing, thoughts racing so fast, words rolling off my tongue, on fire. I was talking about the Mau Mau, about how their armed struggle, unprecedented, had broken the back of imperialism on the continent. About how the Mau Mau were a movement of movements, a movement of the people rising up, against imperialism, and against the capitalist system. And about how the imperialists realised at a certain point that if they wanted to save the essential thing, if they wanted to save capitalism, the most prudent course of action was to surrender formal sovereignty, to give the natives their own states. I was emphasizing how independent statehood was not the same thing as freedom, but that its magic was that it could create the illusion of freedom, while keeping the majority of people enslaved.

His friends, who had gathered around us, were murmuring things in Shang. Wanjau told me, "they are saying that they like how you speak. You know why? Because they can recognise your spirit. Your spirit. It's the other we who went away, and came back in a white man, so we embrace him. That's why whenever you talk, I listen, because you talk the way my grandmama talked, the way those elderly people talk."

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Jah Driver wanted to show me what his work was like, so he invited me one afternoon to accompany him in his matatu while he made the rounds. Wanjau came along for the ride, too. The three of us sat in the cabin up front. The vehicle was painted in vibrant green, gold, and red. The matatus in Nairobi are renowned for their artistic flare, like moving murals, often paying homage to so many street heroes and legends, from Bob Marley, to Tupac and Biggy, to Drake, to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, to Koffi Annan, to Lionel Messi, to Che Guevara, to Jesus Christ. A selection of Jah Driver's favorite reggae tunes was playing loudly in the back, for the passengers, who he stopped to pick up and drop off every couple minutes.

The traffic on and around Juja Road was incredibly dense. "Nairobi on the move. Everybody rushing home," Jah Driver observed. The piki pikis wove in and out gracefully, while the cars, alternatively, accelerated and lurched ahead, then came to a grinding halt, only to accelerate again, with a rhythm reminiscent of the inhale and exhale of effortless breath. There was a ferocity in the syncopated flow, a spontaneous order amidst the chaos, too. Anarchic, no doubt, though agents of the state appeared every now and then, on patrol, to exact tribute from the passers-by.

Then there were the throngs of pedestrians, who would dash in and out, between the cars, with reckless abandon, to find their way across the street. Jah Driver remarked that the penalties could be severe if you hit one of them. "They treat us like criminals, man" he said. "When I hit somebody on the road here and he dies, it's a little bit easier case than when he's alive. When he's alive he can sue me forever. I can be locked in forever, because there is a witness, so sometimes people here find it easier, when you hit somebody, just make sure you are done with him. But me, in a Rasta way, I don't feel that is good."

As we made our way through the Eastleigh neighborhood, suddenly he motioned, "right here, right here, this is the spot." The place where a bomb had exploded, back in December of 2013, an al-Shabaab attack, on another matatu, just in front of his. "The matatu was like this one, exactly same model," he shook his head, as if the image of all the carnage were flashing again in his mind's eye. He had stopped to drop off a passenger, about a minute or so before the bomb detonated, and so barely avoided being caught up in the debris. But he was among the first to arrive on the scene. "A lot of people got burned, many died. I see the lives of people, being killed, some of them helpless, and they were just bawling, man, bawling, bawling. My blood ran cold."

The violence from al-Shabaab was certainly traumatic, but still exceptional; the threat from apolitical bad boys was much more the norm. It happened quite frequently that they would hijack the

matatus, and rob everyone on board. They would come baring guns, and collect cell phones, wallets, whatever else the passengers might be carrying on them of any worth. This is one way the conflict between the lumpen and the working class seemed to play itself out in Nairobi, on board the matatus. Jah Driver reflected: "They have guns, you know. So they start robbing us, from front to back. One of them gives a signal, and they take over. The driver, you are told, 'you drive according to orders. If you don't, then I shoot you'. It's crazy. So the middle class, the working class, are in trouble, when it comes to the ghetto youths."

"Yea, yea, yea, yea, black on black violence, whether it be criminal violence, or it be political violence, political ethnicity, politicized ethnicity. Black on black violence, all the same," Wanjau chimed in.

"Criminal violence, yea man," Jah Driver replied. "But let's not forget, the real criminal is the big man, the big fish is the real criminal. And as for violence, when it comes to violence, no one is more violent around here than the police."

Yet another form of violence, a structural violence, an environmental one, was palpable as well. As we approached Dandora, the air became noticeably hazier, much thicker, and began to reek of burning plastic. The source of the contamination, a monument of sorts, the city's main dumpsite. Every day over 2,000 tonnes of metric waste are deposited there. According to an exposé in Al Jazeera, Dandora "hosts an informal recycling economy which feeds nearly 3,000 families in surrounding slums." The environmental impact of the dumpsite, and its effect on community health, is devastating. They say that child mortality rates exceed those of the city average by something like ten times. "This is the location, and it's right behind that school just there." Jah Driver commented, as we drove past. "The dumpsite, as you can see, it's a big valley of waste, it's a mountain of dump," he concluded, with more than a hint of disgust.

"Do you ever get depressed, forced to confront all this down-pressure?" I asked them.

Jah Driver cracked a smile: "Man, you come from the university. But we here, we are in the university of determination! Jah, Rastafari!"

He let out a hearty laugh, but quickly, so quickly, a look of deadly seriousness came over his face. "There's no time to get depressed. Here we have to hustle to survive. Sometimes it can feel overwhelming, sure, but, you know, there's no time to sit around and be sad. You have to hustle to make some money so that your children can eat. If you don't find food, then children will cry, man. And it's a crazy thing to see a kid crying for hunger," he replied.

He paused for a moment, to gather his thoughts, before continuing: "What we need is some real liberation! Here in the matatus, we are being considered as illiterate, illiterate people, and those people who are not with any significance." The first necessary step towards liberation, he continued, quoting again his idol Bob Marley, is "to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds." This is a point that the people at the MSJC are adamant about, and quite persuasive, the need for a revolution in consciousness. "Because, let me tell you something," his cadence got quicker, as if to emphasize the urgency of the matter, "we are being colonised, our mind. From spiritual, physical, even our foods. We are being Americanised, we are being Europeanised, you don't know. And it's a tough life, when you see the competitors, the middle class. You know, they want the poor people down here to compete with them. That's why you see, poor man will go to steal, just to wear expensive cap. You know, cap is around 7,000 shillings here, original, 10,000, perhaps. Cap, you know, a youth man there, when he see a middle class wear, a caterpillar shoe,



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man, and he's like, in admiration, and he wonders where he's going to get the money."

"Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds," Wanjau and I broke out in song, in unison, in response.

To which, Jah Driver would in turn reply: "Yea man, it's true, but here you try to emancipate yourself, you do that, then what next, what next? You're still in the same situation."

Wanjau appeared to change the subject. He took a long drag on the joint, whose smoke filled the front cabin, before turning to me, and proclaiming: "But we have the prophecy, we see it in a vision. We are two Moses, waiting for the third. Perhaps it is you, perhaps you come to make the whole thing complete."

"Yea man," chimed in Jah Driver, himself partaking of a drag, "because this has been our dream, the arrival of a third Moses. We have been aspiring and looking forward to this day. When will this day be? Because right about now, we may finally be in fantasies of genuine reality."

"Are you Moses, too?" Wanjau asked.

"You are Moses, both of you," I told them. "I am but Ezequiel."

"Ezequiel?" they asked, a bit confused.

"Ezequiel!" I replied, emphatically.

"Irie man!" Jah Driver quipped, as they both burst out in laughter.

"The one who cried out, to the corrupted generations, and explained what was going on," I continued, evoking, reliving, my delusional state from my psychotic break a few years back.

"That's what I was doing, man, back in 2012, crying out in the streets of Cambridge, and London, and Paris: 'Opulence amidst Poverty, Shame on You Babylon. War! Destruction! Your fault! Your fault!'"

Jah Driver shook his head, smiling, as he focused on the road ahead. "You may not be the third Moses, Mr. Ezequiel, but you are certainly not like all those NGO folks. They are the lions in the sheep's skin, and it has just fallen down, there is a lot of people in false skin. They are pretending they are the doers, but they are not the doers, the real doers are down here, man. With you, in the struggle. Today, in Nairobi, Dandora, Mathare, you don't know, Thomas Jeffrey Miley, Moses Wanjau, Jah Driver Marley, once again, man. Spiritual! Very spiritual!"

Then Wanjau looked me in the eye, and solemnly declared:

"Only a madman can stay with a madman. I'm a rebel, an outlaw, for an outlaw soul. There are those outlaw angels, you are one of them, too, Mr. Ezequiel! Me, I fear no man. I've been trained by the best. The jungle. The hustlers. But I have another option. And that is to fight for what is just. That's what brings us together."

In that Irie state, it certainly felt like a prophecy was really unfolding.

I shouted out, with a fervor quickly approximating what I had felt back in 2012: "Divine justice is on the way! Is on the way! Judgment day arrives!"

And Jah Driver exclaimed: "Judgment day! Rastafari, Selassie!"

"Judgment day!," I repeated again, even more emotionally this time.

"Judgment of the poor!" Jah Driver shouted back, with glee.

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A couple of days later, we met up again, in the den, for a jam session. Jah Driver had contacted several of his closest Rasta collaborators, musicians. He was eager for me to listen to them make some reggae music, live, ghetto style. Esqualito was there, Danito as well, and, of course, Baba Nesta, who brought with

him his own unique instrument, a hybrid between a harp and a guitar, something he had fashioned himself, recycled out of waste.

Baba Nesta's appearance on the scene was dramatic. He came impressively dressed, with a sharp blue, collared, long sleeved shirt, bright white pants, and silky suede shoes, a loose-hanging gold necklace, loopy dark sunglasses, and super thick dreads. When he pulled back the curtain and stepped into the den, the bright morning light shined in over his shoulder, and, just for a moment, everyone fell silent. He was a legend in the hood, a bit older, seemingly wiser than the rest. He commanded attention, even awe, and carried himself with gravitas and grace.

"Rastaman!" Jah Driver called out.

"Irie man, Sellassie I," Baba Nesta replied. The two men clasped their right hands together tightly, shaking their interlocked fists, in lieu of a full embrace. You could feel the love, the mutual respect and admiration, between them.

Baba Nesta set down his instrument, took off his sunglasses, and glanced over at me. "Fire, fire, burning bright," he pronounced, before busting out a big grin.

"Yea man, this is Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley, also known as Ezequiel, from California, U.S.A., to Cambridge, U.K., straight to Nairobi town. The one I was telling you about," intervened Jah Driver.

"Big up," Baba Nesta said, then sat down, and started tuning his instrument. The session was about to begin. A beat box had been playing, low, in the background; now they turned it up.

Jah Driver grabbed the recorder; and suddenly, he was the M.C. He spoke over the music: "Greetings in the name of the Emperor Hailie Selassie I the First, Jah, Rastafari! Straight from Nairobi, Kenya, this is Jah Driver. Genesis 1:11. Let the earth bringeth forth grass, and the herb building seed. Today in Mathare, shantied, happening this way."

One of the younger boys, next to Jah Driver, leaned forward and chimed in: "This is Gooch, I'm in Shantied, and we are doing something like music, reggae music."

Jah Driver went around the dark room, with the recorder in hand, and one by one, the guys stepped up, to introduce themselves. When he was finished with these introductions, he stopped before Baba Nesta, who was plucking away at his instrument, and now looked up and began to chant:

**"Repatriate, repatriate, repatriate.**

**All the world them talk about repatriation,**

**Bob Marley, them talk about repatriation,**

**This is the land of repatriation.**

**You see, this is Canaan.**

**This is the land where His Imperial Majesty himself led his Parliament,**

**So that the people should come and realise equal rights and justice.**

**You hear me say?**

**So now he sowed us a son, all the way from, California!**

**This is the son,**

**He brings the vibes from abroad,**

**Repatriate the vibes and bring them together.**

**This is the land where comes repatriation.**

**We've got the vibes,**

**We've got the roots,**

**We've got the heart,**

**Everything good for I and I,**

**Fire, light it up!**

**Dread, dread, dread!"**

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They passed him a joint, and he took a gigantic hit. Jah Driver cheered him on: "Again, again, again, pull up, pull up."

This was my welcome to the crew, from Baba Nesta. The session would last for over an hour. It was a spiritual celebration, albeit of sordid sorts. They sang both in Shang and in English, riffing on classic Rastafarian themes, ranging from the evils of Babylon to the need to legalise marijuana. Again and again, they denounced the material misery, the wretched conditions, of their milieu. While they expressed a deepfelt conviction that their trials and tribulations were not in vain, that they were all part of the unfolding of a divine plan, one that was written in the Book, the Book that foretold that Zion was destined to rise.

The worship of the marijuana was certainly central to the session. Multiple joints were making the rounds, the den was dank with smoke, drenched with the sour smell of what they considered a holy herb. They paid tribute to this sacrament in song, with Esqualito rhyming at length about it in Shang, while, for his part, Baba Nesta cried out:

"High grade in the morning,  
High grade in the evening,  
Weed!  
Smoke it!  
High grade,  
Afternoon,  
I'm gonna smoke it night long, til dawn.  
Give me,  
High grade in the morning,  
High grade in the evening,  
Smoke it, smoke it.  
Give me,  
High grade,  
Afternoon.  
Rastaman smoke it night long, til dawn.  
Attitude.  
Like Bob in the Buckingham Palace,  
Remember Peter Tosh when he lit up the chalice,  
Telling the police to legalize it,  
Don't criticize it,  
It's good for meditation,  
Healing of the nation,  
High grade!"

At which point the den erupted in laughter, and with applause. Jah Driver tried to follow this up, by chanting, in between puffs:

"Legalize it,  
Don't criticize it,  
Draw a paper draft to the commissioner,  
Draw another one to the president,  
Ruling in Abyssinian resident.  
We smoke, the both eyes them turn red."

More laughter, more applause. "Today we are chanting Babylon down," Jah Driver triumphantly announced. A cue for Baba Nesta, who broke out again in song:

"Rule still,  
Jah Jah rule, rule,  
Above all the masters,  
Jah Jah rule still.  
From all corners of the earth,  
Selassie I rule still.  
Above all kings and queens of the earth,  
Jah Jah rule still!

Jah Jah rule above all the masters, the preachers, and the government, you see them.

One step, I make out of Babylon, I see them stumble, stumble and fall.

Babylon stumble, stumble and fall.

Two steps, we make out of Babylon, see the wicked go down,

Ah, down, down, down to the ground.

Babylon, go down, down, down, down into the ground.

Like the walls of Jericho, down, down, down, down to the ground.

Wicked, go down, down.

One step, I take, out of Babylon, I see them tumble and fall.

Babylon tumble.

Two steps we make, we see them go down, down, down, down to the ground.

Babylon go down, down, down, like the walls of Jericho.

I see them tumble, down, down, down to the ground.

Babylon go down!

Sing farewell to the fallen harlot,

Babylon, go down!

When Rastafari come,

Jah gonna be dread, dread, dread, dread, dread, dread.

Jah Rastafari!

Fire, fire, fire!

Babylon, your days are numbered!!!"

Chanting down Babylon, and praying for the strength to rise up, to overcome adversity of all sorts. As when Baba Nesta also sang:

"Sometimes I feel like crying, that I should cry, 'til I die,  
But only asked myself, why should I die,  
Crying, then to keep trying.  
Sometimes I feel like crying, that I should cry 'til I die,  
But only asked myself,  
Why should I die, crying,  
Then to keep trying.  
So I'm going to rise up and shine,  
Come out of darkness to the light,  
Wanna come out of darkness and shine, brightness like the sun  
While talking to dry bones and carcasses,  
Down in the valley of the shadow of death,  
Jah to us poor, send him to those who are living in darkness,  
To tell them, say, youth want to be wise,  
Open up your eyes,  
It's time to realize,  
Rise up and shine.  
So sober, sober, stepping up, higher,  
Saying, forward ever, we no turn back, never.  
Death can't combat, if you wear true colors,  
Red, gold and green is my royal banners.  
So I'm going to rise up and shine.  
Fire!"

As the session finally wound down, Jah Driver solemnly declared, into the recorder, as if for posterity's sake: "That was Baba, prophetic, Nesta. Alongside Fire Esqualito. This is Blessed Minds family, and international, you don't know. Straight, Nairobi, Kenya, Shantied, Mathare."



We made our way out of the den, in a haze, and over to the Lea Mathare Learning Centre, where Gregory Waitthaka was waiting for us, with his group of some thirty orphaned kids. G.I. they called him. He came from Mathare himself, and was one of the very few who managed to make his way up through the educational system, to obtain a university degree. But he did not flee from his community; to the contrary, he wanted to give back, so he had started a school for street kids several years back. The Learning Centre, in which they did their best to educate the children in accordance with Rasta principles. Though they did so on the down-low, since the more conservative elements in the community harbored considerable prejudices against the Rastamen and their ways.

To get to the Learning Centre, we had to pass through a mixed neighborhood known as Mradi. Jah Driver commented that during the post-election violence, in 2008, this had been the site of most intense violence, between Kikuyus and Luos. He stopped, and pointed at Esqualito. "You see, me, I am Kikuyu, and Fire Esqualito here, he is Luo. We in Blessed Minds, and in the Rasta movement, we bring unity to the communities. But let me tell you, a few years ago, this valley was the valley of death."

When we got to Lea Mathare, we were received by the children with great joy, perhaps especially, myself. The kids ranged in age between 6 or so, all the way up to about 12. They were dressed in red uniforms. Jah Driver and Esqualito sang some children's songs for them, in Shang. Then I sat down in the middle of the group, they surrounded me in a circle, and I pulled out a card I had been carrying inside a book I had brought along with me, in my bag. The book was Ngugi Wa Thiongo's memoir, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*. The card had a drawing of a chalice on the front, and inside was blank. An artisan product,

made by a collective called tunajenga, or "we are building."

I asked the children if they could relay for me a story, any story, perhaps one that their grandmother had told them. There was silence at first. But finally, a girl, around 10, spoke up. Each sentence she uttered, I wrote down verbatim in the card, asking the kids to help me spell out the words. She began to tell a Biblical story, the story of Joseph, in Shang. Gregory translated for me into English. I transcribed:

"There once was a boy named Joseph.

He was his father's favourite son.

His brothers and sisters were jealous of him.

They plotted against him.

They sold him into slavery.

So he became a slave.

But he was destined one day to become king.

Because he could interpret dreams."

That's as far as the story got. I handed the girl the card, as a gift, and said to her: "Take this card, and never forget the story of Joseph. About a boy who was his father's favorite, a boy who was a slave, a boy who was destined to become a king."

Then I turned to the rest of the group, and told them, repeat after me: "I am Joseph."

"I am Joseph," they called out.

"I am Joseph," I said again.

"I am Joseph," they called out again.

"A lesson to remember," I told them. "Now get to work on interpreting dreams."

The children hugged us on our way out, and begged us to come back again soon. We promised we would.







They call her Mama Africa. They call her Fire Mama. She was orphaned at a young age, grew up on the streets, belonged to the community. And for as long as she can remember, she has looked after those who have nothing and nobody. Nelly Wanjiru knows deep down that she is a prophet, a humble servant of the Most High. The heartfelt conviction unites her with Jah Driver.

She is closing in on half a century now, and it's been several years since she can walk. Confined to a wheelchair. Sometimes she feels forsaken, she even contemplates giving up. Her house is full of children, but still, she is lonely out here in Juja. And she wonders if she will ever walk again.

The odds are stacked against her. But they always have been, which is why she remains convinced that God is on her side, that he's got big plans for her yet. That her best time is still to come.

Her place is on property that belongs to Kenyatta. They say that no matter where you go in the country, Kenyatta is your neighbor. His family gobbled up so much land. Political power bleeding into economic might, a most emphatic case in point, and so, a most appropriate place to squat. We soon concocted plans to build a commune on the spot.

Nelly came out to greet us by the big green gate at the entrance of her compound. A concrete courtyard in which several roosters resided. She was quite capable of moving in the wheelchair, could manoeuvre around in it rather adroitly. Her flesh flowed over the edges of the seat. She is a big woman, and though incapacitated, still strong.

She clasped my hand quite firmly. "I am so glad you finally made it, you are welcome, very welcome. I've been on Marley's case for weeks for him to come visit. But he never seems to listen. If he keeps on ignoring me like this, one day he will meet my wrath!"

Her hair was braided back, her eyes were locked with mine. She stared straight into my soul, and seemed to like what she saw. She smiled a wide, wide smile, the gap between her pearly white front teeth, strangely, reminded me of my granddad. A man who

had abandoned life on this planet nearly two decades prior, but whose presence I still frequently felt. It was as if she had somehow channelled him. I sensed myself immediately at home; she put me at ease.

We carry the souls of our lost loved ones in our hearts. Those who have shaped us; those who made us who we are. And the spiritually gifted can tap into that energy, they can locate the hidden recesses where the ancestors dwell, they can resuscitate them, release them. This is, I believe, what Nellie had done. For though it was her body, it was my beloved grandfather who was looking up and smiling right at me.

She is a captivating story-teller, like my granddad, too. "My story has more pages than Kimathi," she boasts. Born in Mathare, in September of 1970, almost to the day of my big brother's birth. Born into a family of three, just like me. But first her father died; then her big sister died; and finally, her mother died, too. Leaving her all alone. After that, "I was just in the community, doing little things, like washing clothes for people. But I used to like helping sick people in the community. And orphans. I had a heart of feelings, I didn't like to see children being harmed, by their parents. If I see people, small children going to beg, or to do things, to drink glue, I was feeling so bad," she said.

And so she began, real young, to collaborate with some of the local churches and NGO's, to help attend to the needs of the neediest. For example, she worked with the folks at Redeem Gospel Church, and was affiliated with a program called Kenya People Living with HIV, as well as with a project where they cooked porridge, at lunchtime, daily, "to give to the children in the community, so that they can have a meal for the day. I used to volunteer myself to go in those projects, to teach the children how to be, not to go to the street to beg."

She was also quite interested in music, from an early age. She was an autodidact, and eventually started teaching the children drumming and traditional dances. Indeed, her good deeds, combined with her charisma and her performance skills, were renowned in the community. She was a street celebrity of sorts. She soon got hooked up with the Kenyan National Theatre, as a dancer, and performed as a comedian as well. She worked with a prominent group called Vioja Mahakamani, appearing frequently on their television show, one of the most popular comedy programs on Kenya Broadcasting Corporation. She ascended to fame, if never to riches.

People in the community would see her on the TV and marvel, "Oh my God, is that Nelly, the girl from Mathare?" She recruited others from the community for the program as well, and was so happy whenever they would receive a little cash for their talents. Meanwhile, with the support of St. Theresa's Church, she was able to expand her traditional dance lessons, where she groomed many performers, and did her best to introduce them to the people in the National Theatre. Some of her students are now in places like Spain and Germany, employed as professional dancers. She is real proud of that. "They called me teacher," she reminisced, her face flush again with that great big smile.

She remained determined to make a difference in her community, and not just for those who excelled in the arts. There is a place in Mathare that they call Nigeria, a place that is infamous for being infested with drugs. "That is my place, my best place," she recalled. "I used to go there and talk to those guys who are taking those drugs. Some of them, they used to like me, because I used to talk to them and tell them, 'this thing you are doing, you are going to die of it. Can you be able, can you accept me? I can take you to rehabilitation, to mental hospital, you can change, you can be somebody, you are a good person, you can do more things'." She was linked up by then with the folks at Medics Sans Frontiers, and she had a knack for cajoling them into sponsoring the rehabilitation of some of these young men. "I was so happy with my work in the

community, before I got sick. All the people I used to talk to, in Mathare, they used to hear me, they used to listen to me, and even sometimes, I used to ask myself, 'Am I a prophet?'."

"Of course you are," I replied.

"Yes, I am a prophet!" she suddenly exclaimed. "I used to ask myself, why do they call me Mama Africa? Why do they call me Fire Mama? Some of them are calling me Mnati, some of them are calling me Rasta woman."

"So tell me," I asked, "what exactly is your relationship with Rastafarianism?"

"You know, it's strange. I would go listen to reggae music. I've always loved reggae music. And I'd be there listening, and suddenly, the DJ would call out to me, 'Rasta woman! Mama Africa'. I would be like, what do they see?"

"Just when you sit in this room, you see the aura, the presence of the Holy Spirit, it surrounds you, it emanates out of you, pulls people towards you," I told her, totally convinced.

"I used to listen to Bob Marley, I would dance around to his song, Buffalo Soldier, when I was a really little girl. Even my mom, God rest her soul, she would say, 'you are crazy, dancing reggae music, what is a buffalo soldier, anyway?' And I would tell her, 'One day you will know what is buffalo soldier'."

"Yea, one day we will know," I echoed.

"Because I'm a soldier, I'm a buffalo soldier. And I used to make locks in my hair, even if they were just three, so that I can call myself Rasta. Then I started taking the weed. And with the weed, I started realizing my career, my hopes, what I am, and what am I supposed to do. That is when I create things."

"Sounds familiar," I said, laughing.

"With weed, I see many things," she continued. "I see future of many people, I see things growing, big and big. And I'm so happy with myself, and that's why I always tell Marley, just pull these people, we have a big space here, to do many things."

She told me her dream was to establish a children's home out here in Juja. One that could gather the orphans from Mathare, and teach them Rasta ways, and teach them arts and crafts for survival, too. She said she had a dream, a vision, where they were making t-shirts with the prophets emblazoned on them, and in the dream, she was explaining to the kids the significance of each of the prophets' deeds. "Because Rasta's not just about dreads, it is about the word, about the way. The righteous way to live."

I told her I could see the potential of this space out here in Juja, that it is a space that could serve as a respite, a refuge, for the kids, a safe space, a space away from all the brutality in which so many children are trapped, in Mathare. A space where a commune could be built, where a new generation could come up. I told her that I, too, could see many things when I smoke the weed, and that I could see the future she was envisioning, crystal clear through all the smoke.

She smiled that great big smile one more time, and opened her arms, and said to me, "Welcome home." We hugged. Then she broke out into song, her voice so tender, her sentiment so beautiful:

"Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love.  
Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love.  
Jah Jah love will leave follow.  
Going to west, going to east,  
Going to east, going to west,  
Remember Jah Jah love,  
He's there for you follow,  
Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love,  
Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love,

Jah Jah love will leave follow.  
Mama Africa never die,  
Mama Africa never give up,  
Mama Africa will spread,  
The word of Jah Jah love.  
Jah Jah Love, Jah Jah love,  
Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love,  
Jah Jah love, Jah Jah love,  
Jah Jah love, Jah Jah Love,  
Jah Jah love will leave follow."

I pulled out a copy of Matigari that I had carried with me in my bag, found the relevant passage, and proceeded to read out: "The true seeker of truth never loses hope. The true seeker of real justice never tires. A farmer does not stop planting seeds just because of the failure of one crop. Success is born of trying and trying again. Truth must seek justice. Justice must seek the truth. When justice triumphs, truth will reign on earth."

"Yes, hope, truth, justice," she said. "Now me, I'm here, waiting, waiting to light this fire, because I want the fire to burn, a big fire."

"The fire is burning, it's getting stronger, by the moment," I replied.

What was I implicitly promising her? What was I implicitly promising myself? The questions came up, briefly, in my mind, but, quite quickly, I managed to repress them, to push them aside. I was not in the mood to entertain any such sources of self-doubt, much less to consider any kind of critical reflections about the prospect of a festering white saviour complex. To the contrary, I felt increasingly compelled to surrender to the fantasy that I, too, am a prophet, that I had embarked on a sacred mission, from Jah, and that it was destiny that had brought me together with the Rasta warriors surrounding the MSJC.

There were those who favored a diagnosis of bipolar back after my break, in 2012. Be that as it may, I pushed back, what would the diagnosis of the prophet Ezequiel be?



Later that week, we returned to the Lea Mathare Learning Centre, as promised. This time I had the chance to speak to Greg in some more depth, about his past, about his school's history, it's philosophy, it's predicaments, and about his plans for the future. He exuded a clear but calm confidence, a commitment and capacity to persevere. Who knows what Jah Driver had told him about me and my intentions, perhaps it had been my performance in the classroom the other day, but whatever the reason, he greeted me and treated me as a source of inspiration, and a harbinger of good things to come. Somehow my mere presence seemed to reinforce his firmly held belief in a flourishing future, one that was his destiny, one that rightfully belonged to him. "I believe in Jah," he told me, "I follow Jah's will. I don't just follow humankind."

Gregory Waithaka was born in Mathare some thirty years ago. His mother died when he was ten, "so it was hard." He held my gaze, stared right back into my eyes, and emphasized: "It was a challenge for me to grow up in the ghetto, where all kind of crimes, you know, drugs, every day, is here. So, I grow up in the street, up to the age of 15 years." Around that time, he had the good fortune of joining a children's home, a street school, called Made in the Street.

"Right there, on the other side of the road," he nodded, in its direction. "So I had the chance to complete my education. Up through every level," he said, his head up, his voice resounding with pride, "until I received my diploma. And let me tell you, it was a struggle, a struggle on every level." He looked down, at a crack in the concrete floor, before adding: "Many are struggling, here in the ghetto, but silently."

After graduating with a diploma, he had options. But he didn't want to be employed by some company, no, he wanted to come back to the community, to give back to his community, "because I believe I'm a Rasta," he confided, despite his bald head. "I'm not a Babylon," he went on to claim, quite persuasively, full of conviction.

He paused for a long time, seemed lost for words. I broke the silence: "No, you are no betrayer of your people."

"But I can't do this alone," he replied. "I need support from friends, from friends like you, Jeff." There was the rub. The school was in dire need of cash, for supplies, for books, for everything, really. And so, not for the first time, nor for the last, I came face to face with an appeal to translate my abstract desire to express solidarity into the concrete currency of capitalist modernity. Fair enough, I supposed. From each according to their abilities, after all. Though this sudden interjection of the almighty dollar into the conversation seemed somehow to sully, even to subjugate, the search for self-determination. How quickly my quixotic quest for internationalism was met with a pragmatic request to establish relations of co-dependency, albeit under the rubric of solidarity, of course. For indeed, the insidious, incessant logic of capitalist property relations would appear to impose an imperative to hustle. From that there seems no escape, all the bluster about prefigurative politics and social relations notwithstanding. Or as my buddy Stephen Casmier might prefer to put the point, any prospective project of internationalist, anti-capitalist self-determination is perhaps inevitably bound to collide against the sovereignty of the tap.

I tried my best to deflect the comment, to ignore its implications, for the moment, at least, and to push forward the dialogue with the interview format I had prepared in my head. I did assure him that I would do what I could to help, but left the content of this help deliberately vague, as had he, before quickly pressing ahead, to ask him to tell me more about the school.

"Lea, in Swahili, means to bring up, to raise up." That, in a word, he explained, is the school's mission, to raise up the coming generation. He started the project back in 2008, with only 12 kids, including his youngest brother and sister, and he decided

to open the place up for the whole community. Now they number in the hundreds, when they are in full swing. He and his staff seek to teach the children practical skills, in addition to exposing them to the basic curriculum, and to lessons from the Bible, as well. "Our main goal is to teach them to live a good life as Rasta children," he confided.

I asked him if he was optimistic about the new generation. He said he was, indeed, and that he was determined to leave a legacy, to lead by example, to make sure the kids "will be remembering me." He emphasized that he was doing his very best to help the children, academically, but even more importantly, "to live the way of Jah, to not be misled by the Babylon system."

I told him it sounded to me a lot like a Christian school, what he was running. He looked at me, appeared a bit puzzled, before replying: "But that's what Rasta is, it is true Christianity." I couldn't quite figure out if he was telling me the truth, or if he was posing as a Christian, or posing as a Rasta. The hint of the hustle had made me paranoid, perhaps. Or maybe it had more to do with the potency of the weed. Either way, I was perplexed.

"You know, there are other institutions around here, where people are following a business model, looking to make money off the children. That's not what we do here. That's why, when I say we are Rasta, I mean we try to be true Christians. We're not in this to make money," he added, as if to reassure me. "Let's head over to the classroom."

I followed him in. There was Jah Driver, in front of about thirty kids. There were more in attendance this time. He had been warming them up, by reciting some classic reggae rhymes, mixed together with children's songs. He knew how to work a crowd. The energy in the room was electric. I entered the scene like a rock star, and the room erupted with cries of joy. "Good afternoon, young lions of Zion!" I called out. "We're here to chant down Babylon today!"

First things first, I got them to gather around me, and I showed them pictures of my young son James. One of the girls asked, "Why do you call her James? That is a boy's name."

I responded, "That's because he is a boy."

"Can't be," she replied. "She is too beautiful to be a boy."

"You might be right," I said. They laughed.

Then I asked them who could tell me the story of Joseph, once more. Several hands shot up, they were less shy this time around. I picked a girl named Varnelli, and got the class to repeat after her, in Shang. Greg translated for me. They knew the story well.

The kids called out louder, got more excited, with each round of repetition. By the end of the story, they were jumping up and down.

"Word of the Lord!" I cried out.

"Thanks be to God!" they replied.

"The promise, the promise, the promise of the God of Abraham! One day you will be kings!" I shouted.

"Kings!" they cried out.

"Kings and queens!" I clarified.

"Kings and queens!" they repeated.

Then I screamed, "Justice!"

They screamed back, "Justice!"

I screamed, "Justice!"

They screamed back, a second time, "Justice!"

"Not charity," I emphasized, "but what?"

They cried out, a third time, "Justice!"

"And you take your justice!" I replied, emphatically.



Then Jah Driver intervened, breaking out into song: "The lion of Judah, shall break every chain, the lion of Judah, shall break every chain!"

The kids sang the song, with him. They were dancing around the room now.

After that, we got them to roar like lions. And then we chanted: "Crushing, crushing, Babylon! Crushing, crushing, down, down!" The room was raucous now. Folks were gathering by the door to catch a glimpse of what was going on inside.

A group of three girls came forward, and said they had a song to sing. It took us a while to get the room silent, so they could sing it. They proceeded to deliver a simple but moving version of "Redemption Song."

More songs, more dance, ensued. There was a little boy, about six, named Jeff. He could dance like Michael Jackson. The kids formed a circle around him, and clapped, while he bust out some serious moves.

"Awesome, man. That's the spirit. So much talent in this room. This is where God dwells," I said.

Jah Driver took me aside. "You need to realize, Doctor, this is a feeding program," he told me. "They feed them here. Because most of them, they might sleep hungry for a few days."

Back in the center of the room, Greg had the kids volunteering to share what they called "memory verses." We joined the circle.

"My name is Madeline Sak," said one girl. "I have a memory verse for you. My memory verse comes from the book of Matthew, chapter 7, verse 1. It says: Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you."

Another girl spoke out: "My name is Berline Njoi. I have a memory verse. My memory verse comes from the Book of Exodus, chapter 20, verse 12. It says: Honor your mother and your father, so that you may live long in the land where I am giving you."

Next, the boy who was the brilliant dancer intervened: "My name is Jeff Mtomoni. I have a memory verse. My memory verse comes from the Book of Peter, chapter 4, verse 9. It says: Open your home without complaining to anyone enter."

Jah Driver, too, had something to share: "Greetings to all children. My name is Jah Driver, and I have a memory verse. It comes from Psalms, chapter 1, verse 1. It says: Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people, who do not join the evildoers, who do not join their way."

And around the circle they went. Until, at last, it was my turn. I told them: "I have a memory verse myself. It comes from the book of James, chapter 1, verse 17: Every great and perfect gift comes from above."

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The word enthusiasm means, literally, "inspired by a god's essence." I was feeling every day more enthusiastic. Eager to let myself be swept away by the strongest of tides. When I fell in love with Flor, a decade before, I had experienced the pull of a similarly intense, quasi-magnetic force. She had bewitched me over at her pink pad, in the throbbing heart of Madrid, one late, drunken night, while I gazed at her gazing at herself in a body-length mirror, listening to latin pop, getting all dolled up, ready to hit the town. It took me years, and all my might, to break the spell. And doing so brought me to the breaking point; for when I finally managed to end things with her, the decision triggered my first psychotic episode. Or "messianic moment," as I preferred to think of it. Now I was on the verge of a second such epistemic-cum-existential break.

The tension between Johanna and me had been steadily rising, the more immersed I got into the world of Mathare. Truth is, she

had been unhappy with the relationship ever since she had given birth to our son James. She felt I was not pulling my weight in what they call nowadays matters of reproductive care, and, indeed, that I had proven myself incapable of holding her up when she was down. So, slowly but surely, her resentments had grown, and with them, the distance, the friction, the fiction, in the space between us.

But the situation had deteriorated significantly over the past several months. A turning point was the strike in Cambridge. Around the time of the strike, I had been approached by a young biologist named Marcel Llaveró, in his capacity as a leader of the activist student group Zero Carbon, who asked me to make a run for the University Council, which I decided to do on a "democratic confederalist" platform. Accordingly, my "reasons for candidacy" had read:

I stand for election to the University Council at this moment because a group of diverse student campaigns have approached me, motivated by their conviction that it is absolutely urgent that the University change course, that it needs to lead more, and to act more responsibly, to forge the terms of public debate about the science of climate change and its social and political causes and consequences. The students who contacted me are part of the divestment campaign from fossil fuels.

I feel honoured to respond to their appeal, as it is my strong conviction that the problem of climate change is the most urgent problem of our deeply problematic age. In fact, I believe that the current ecological crisis is very much related to ubiquitous, deeply entrenched and unjust hierarchies, which together create vested interests working to inhibit democratic and collectively-rational local and global public policies. In this vein, I believe it is important to point out the links between the struggle against the domination of nature and the struggle against unjust, undemocratic hierarchies more generally.

For these reasons, I welcome the opportunity to be a voice on the University Council not only for those concerned with the ecological crisis, but also for those concerned with a variety of intersecting, acute global social problems, such as: (1) the struggle against the threat to civil liberties and the criminalisation of communities posed by the ongoing war on terror, as manifest in the campaign against "Prevent"; (2) the struggle against neoliberal austerity – indeed, plutocracy – as manifest in the campaign for a living wage, as well as of course the UCU's current strike against the assault on our pensions; (3) resistance against patriarchy, as manifest in campaigns against unequal pay, against sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence, and the struggle for respect and recognition of gender and sexual diversity; and (4) the fight against both insidious and blatant forms of white supremacy, as manifest in the campaign to decolonise the University.

I was destined to lose the election; but my notoriety as a campus radical was certainly much enhanced. My spirits rose with the recognition, and over the course of the strike, I distinguished myself as one of the most militant, and energetic, even incendiary, among the faculty, albeit to the dismay of some of the feminists, I must admit, who accused me of being too angry, and taking up too much space. Even so, it was a special time around campus. As the fiftieth anniversary of the glorious Spring of 1968 approached, it appeared, for just a moment, that the noble aspirations of that bygone era could be resuscitated, could come to life once more. It was a conjuncture that seemed pregnant with potential, in which alternative social relations, of solidarity and camaraderie, were prefigured, and came to congeal around the picket lines, in the teach outs, in the union assemblies, and, perhaps most emblematically, in the student

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occupation of the Old Schools. Cracks in the edifice of the neoliberal University had somewhat implausibly, but suddenly, emerged. Another way of organising academic life could just barely be glimpsed.

I was in my element, and as the strike gained momentum, ever more ecstatic. I brought little James with me just about everywhere. He was not quite two, but he was already making his mark. He was something of a celebrity among the strikers. He seemed to love the attention, just like his father. His mother, however, was not amused. She objected to me taking him out into the winter cold, and making him miss his naps.

In the early days of the strike, I had somehow convinced her to participate alongside me, even cajoled her into delivering a memorable speech at one of the rallies. I was so proud of her that day. But as the weeks passed, and I became increasingly obsessed with the collective mobilisation, she became increasingly withdrawn, and, consequently, she and I became increasingly estranged.

She seemed particularly bothered by the fact that I was not sleeping near as much as I should. Then there was my constant cannabis consumption, which was nothing new, but now her patience with it appeared to be finally coming to an end. We began to fight more frequently. And our conversations became fewer and farther between. I left her all alone those days, I must confess. We were disappointed in each other. What had once been converging values, commitments, and ideals had started to irredeemably diverge. The irreconcilable differences that would eventually tear our marriage apart had surfaced at last, and would never again be fully submerged.

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Johanna had landed a postdoctoral position in the Centre for Governance and Human Rights at Cambridge, to work on a project called Africa's Voices, under the directorship of Dr. Sharath Srinivasan. Its angle was to promote interactive radio on the continent, and it was linked up with the so-called Digital Humanities. They brought in Johanna to lead on a piece of work aimed at both understanding and promoting community knowledge about how diseases such as cholera are transmitted. The context for their study was war-torn Somalia. But it was deemed too dangerous to be on-site, so Johanna was to be based, half-time, in Nairobi instead. Which is what brought us there to begin with – she had been itching to get back to Africa.

I, too, was eager to be in Africa. We had gotten married in her grandmother's village, Machame, near Moshi, in the foothills of Mt. Kilimanjaro, and had spent a six-month sabbatical there in James's first year. We had been contemplating the prospect of me giving up my job, and us coming to raise James close to her family. Her post in Nairobi seemed like a definite step in that direction, even if Moshi and Nairobi, though close, were in some ways worlds apart. The plan was for her to go out first, with James, and I would meet up with them once term had ended. I distinctly recall, in those late winter days, as their departure approached, smoking weed in a Cambridge meadow, just off Trumpington Street, en route to strike action, headphones on, Bob Marley's Rastaman Chant blaring, me singing along, near the top of my lungs, "One day soon, when my work is over, I will fly away home, fly away home to Zion, fly away home."

The day Johanna and James were scheduled to fly away was her thirty-second birthday. I was so caught up in the frantic pace, the frenzy, of the moment, that I forgot to wish her a happy birthday. My mind was elsewhere. I, too, was set to travel that afternoon, to Paris, to attend a Peoples' Tribunal on the Crimes against the Kurds. Meanwhile, in the morning, together with the Kurdish Society at Cambridge, I had organized a protest outside of the Department of Engineering, during the picketing, to denounce the University's implication in the arms trade and to

call attention to its link to the plight of the Kurds. We draped the demonic sculpture out in front of the Department in YPJ flags, and I read out in a booming voice:

According to the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, since July 2016, the UK-approved arms exported licences for Turkey exceed £143 million. Since 2008/09, the Department for International Trade's Defence & Security Organisation (DSO) has listed Turkey as a "priority market" every year, despite thousands of civilian casualties and hundreds of thousands displaced, as confirmed and documented by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UN Human Rights Council over time.

The Turkish state's assault on the Kurdish Freedom Movement has entered a new phase with the criminal attack on Afrin. The erstwhile "allies" of the movement turn a blind eye to the atrocities against the people of Afrin and their democratic confederal project - a project which constitutes the only viable alternative to the ongoing spiral of violence, chaos and tyranny currently engulfing the Middle East. The Imperial and sub-Imperial vultures seem to agree on one thing only: that the revolutionary project of democratic confederalism underway in the North Syria Democratic Federation (Rojava) constitutes a threat to all of their interests.

The revolutionary flame ignited by the heroic defense of Kobane against the thugs of ISIS must be extinguished, the Imperialists and sub-Imperialists now seem to agree, before it spreads across the region. The betrayal of the Kurdish Freedom Movement by the Russians and the USA, though thoroughly disgusting, was of course predictable. The Kurdish Freedom Movement's project of democratic confederalism, which features direct democratic assemblies, emphasizes gender emancipation, provides institutional guarantees for multi-ethnic and multi-religious accommodation, and aspires for ecological sustainability - is perhaps humanity's last chance. It constitutes a threat to the murderous plans of the tyrants, the plutocrats, and the war-mongers who are pushing the world to the brink. Which is why all anti-Imperialists, all freedom-lovers, all democrats, must unite to demand an immediate cessation to the hostilities against the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

The crimes against the Kurdish people are crimes against humanity; the resistance of the Kurdish people in the face of these war crimes is the resistance of humanity.

Clearly, since western governments with the power to hold Turkey accountable, such as the UK, US, and Germany are engaged in billions of pounds worth of arms deals with the anti-democratic, increasingly fascist regime under Erdogan, there is little to expect from these governments in terms of accountability for human rights abuses and war crimes.

In such times, the only weapon that the people of Afrin can rely on is international anti-war solidarity.

It was only when I came home, and overheard her on the phone with her brother, that I remembered the secular significance of the date. My forgetfulness, so emblematic of my priorities, hurt her feelings badly that day. I rushed out, to buy her a sunflower, but the gesture was too little, too late.

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Flash forward, months later, there I found myself, lighting it up, on the sly, in the pastor's mansion-cum-luxury Air B&B in Lavington. We stayed in a large, circular, lavender room. There was a balcony that went all the way around it, and that I would step out onto, to get myself revved up in the mornings. It looked out over the lush compound. The only problem was that dank smell. It had a way of creeping back through the windows, to saturate our room, and stink up the nearby staircase as well. Which meant that my furtive habit was something of an open secret among the help.

One beautiful, blue-skied morning, just a few days after I brought Jah Driver home, I was relaxing in the room, lounging on the bed, an open biography of Dedan Kimathi by Sam Kahiga in hand, when Johanna came back to pick up some papers she had left on the desk. I had just toked up, no more than fifteen minutes before.

She scowled at me, shook her head, wagged her finger, and angrily pronounced: "Have some respect. This is my Auntie Rhoda's place. We are guests here. This is not your home. The whole side of the house reeks."

I looked up from the book, shrugged my shoulders, and said, sarcastically: "I'm so sorry," before adding, in all seriousness, "But respect, it goes both ways. I am not an adolescent. Try not to treat me like one."

"Then try not to act like one," she blurted back, picked up her papers, and stormed out the room.

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"Would it be okay if Jah Driver came over with his son Jamie one day this weekend?" I asked.

Johanna looked at me, befuddled, for quite some time, before reaching her verdict. "I don't think so. Not here."

"Then where?" I pressed the point.

"I don't know," she replied. "We'll figure something out."

I was pissed off. She had claimed my transgression on that fateful night had been to arrive with Jah Driver unannounced. But now it turned out, much as I had suspected, that the real problem was that I had showed up with him at all. I tried to be philosophical about it. At least she seemed willing, in principle, to let the two children meet. Jah Driver had expressed the desire, the dream, that our two little Jameses could become friends. They were around the same age, but a world of opportunities and resources separated them. Now they would have the fleeting chance to come together, if just for one day.

Still, the fact that she would not let me invite them to the house grated on me, filled me with a sense of righteous indignation. After all, it was an Air B&B, whose doors were open to anyone who could fork out the cash. The previous weekend there had been a wedding celebrated in the big garden there. Over a hundred people on the premises. Drunken UN emissaries stumbling around the compound, even barging into our bedroom, in search of a bathroom, late in the night. So the place was hardly a sanctuary. It was just, as they say, pay to play.

Plus, the idea that we were "guests" in her Auntie's place was for me a bit hard to swallow, since we were shelling out fifteen hundred bucks a month in rent. No, I wasn't buying that argument.

But I knew, nevertheless, that no means no; therefore, I accepted her decision as an immovable fact, a fait accompli. I gave her Jah Driver's number, and got her to agree to call him later in the day, to come up with a plan. Jah Driver suggested that we meet up in Uhuru Park.

Uhuru means freedom in Swahili. I liked the idea of our two sons meeting in a park named after freedom. Not in Lavington, nor in Mathare, but on something more like neutral grounds. Or so it would seem.

It was overcast, even chilly, that Saturday afternoon, the sky looked ominous, threatening to rain. We were running a little late, so Jah Driver, Wanjau, Gregory, Esqualito, and, of course, Jamie, were forced to wait. They came bearing light blue balloons, to share between the boys. Jamie was already playing with his, when we stepped out of the Uber, near one of the entrances to the park, off Kenyatta Avenue, at the intersection with Processional Way, close to Freedom Corner. Jah Driver cordially approached my James, and offered him one of the

balloons. James was scared, and hid behind his mother's legs. It took a lot of coaxing to get him to accept the gift.

We made our way toward the man-made lake, in the center of the park. Johanna did her best to get the two boys to interact. But they seemed suspicious of each other's intentions, and preferred to focus on their respective balloons. We stopped to buy some cotton candy, which caught the boys' attention; their hands briefly touched as they simultaneously reached out to grab the alluring, sticky pink goo. They both smiled, and after that, began to play in the carefree way that only toddlers can.

The boys got their faces painted, too; they looked like miniature Masai warriors. Gregory was telling Johanna about the Lea Mathare Learning Centre; she seemed to be warming up to the guys. Everything was going so well.

We had brought some blankets with us, and decided to spread them out, to sit down on a hill, with a view looking out over the city centre, while the kids ran around in the grass. Esqualito was playing a recording of one of his jam session songs, on his phone, for Johanna. Just then, Jah Driver, Wanjau, and Gregory shuffled away, surreptitiously, to steal a few puffs behind a tree. We turned around, and they had disappeared. A couple minutes passed before they appeared again, on the horizon, handcuffed, being escorted by an undercover cop.

I ran after them, and proceeded to berate the police officer. "Why do you persecute these people? What were they doing wrong?"

"They were breaking the law, sir." He replied. "Bangie bangie is illegal in this country."

"But the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, does it not?" I inquired. "What you call bangie bangie is a sacrament for them. They are not criminals, they were just practicing their religion."

He looked at me, between perplexed and amused. "Just who exactly are you?" he asked.

"My name is Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley, from the University of Cambridge. I am here to document human rights abuses suffered by the Rastafarian community at the hands of the police," I replied. "I suggest you let my friends go."

He laughed. "That will be costly," he said, before repeating, "these men have broken the law."

By now, Johanna had gathered up the blankets, and Esqualito and she were approaching, carrying the two Jameses. She had seen me up in the cop's face, and was urging me to desist.

We followed them down to a makeshift precinct that the police had set up in the park. Jah Driver, Gregory, and Wanjau were escorted behind a big green gate. We waited outside, with both Johanna and little Jamie getting increasingly upset.

After about an hour or so, the police let us go inside, to speak with them. Jah Driver told me they were getting the shake down, but not to worry, they would figure a way out. I slipped him 3,000 schillings, to help with the negotiations. And then I took a photo with them in handcuffs, and with Jamie on his dad's lap. I later stored it on my hard drive under the file name, "Not yet free."





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We called an Uber for Esqualito and Jamie, and left them with enough cash to make sure that Esqualito could drop Jamie off with his mother, before he continued on to his own place.

We then tried to call an Uber for ourselves, but had difficulty getting through this time. It was late in the afternoon by now, the grey sky had turned a deep pink, shading into purple. We were stranded in the park. We made our way back to Kenyatta Avenue, and managed to hail down a cab at the roundabout with Uhuru Highway. Johanna held James tightly in her arms. She was barely speaking to me by then.

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When I was nineteen years old, three college friends of mine and I drove up from Westwood to Isla Vista for the weekend to celebrate Halloween. On Saturday afternoon, one of the three, a kid by the name of Eric Byers, took off to see some of his old high school buddies, down by the beach. He borrowed a motorcycle from one of them, revved it up, went way too fast, and wrapped himself around a tree. He died instantly. We got a phone call early that evening, with the bad news. We were drunk, we'd been drinking all day. My friend Craig Luntz, who was especially tight with Eric, was inconsolable that night. The next morning, we returned to L.A., hung over, in silence. There was an empty spot in the car on the way down. I remember driving south on the 101, my head was pounding, Elton John was playing on the radio:

**"I miss the Earth so much I miss my wife,  
It's lonely out in space  
On such a timeless flight ..."**

What a pointless death, I thought to myself, and vowed never to get on a motorcycle again. I broke that vow, some twenty-six years later, in Mathare.

Wanjau was insistent. The traffic on Juja Road was terrible, it was rush hour. In a taxi it would take me literally hours to get back to Lavington; but not so on a piki piki. They can weave in and out, and make it a matter of minutes, he argued. I really wanted to get home for dinner, as I had promised I would. And I really wanted to see James before he went to sleep, too. Wanjau waved one of the motorcycles down. It stopped in front of us, it had the image of a lion emblazoned on it. And it was decked out with a big red, green, and gold umbrella, which was certainly a trip. I took it as a sign. Wanjau told me to hop on, and that he would get on, too, right behind me. He wanted to accompany me home, to make sure I got back safe. So I did as he suggested. I wrapped my arms around the driver's back, and Wanjau wrapped his arms around mine. The bike glided gracefully down the road, seemingly effortlessly, avoiding all obstacles, not only the trucks, buses, and cars, but also the giant potholes, so abundant on the path. The wind rushed up against my face. I felt freer than free. It was most exhilarating.

When we got to Lavington, though, I felt obliged to invite Wanjau to a drink, before sending him on his way. We headed ever over to Kengele's, where one drink turned into two, two into three, three into four, four into five. We ended up ordering burgers, too. Because I knew, by then, I had missed dinner, after all, and James was already asleep. When the bill finally came, it was for more cash than I had on me. I didn't have any bank cards on me, either, so I had to go get more money from home. Johanna had already gone to bed, she was lying right next to James. I was more than tipsy, and so too noisy, and ended up waking the two of them up. James started crying, and Johanna, who very rarely curses, let out a big sigh and cursed: "My fucking God!"

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Our stay in Nairobi was too quickly nearing its end. As the trip back to Moshi came every day closer, I was more and more determined to make the most of the few remaining days I had left. I wanted to spend as much time as I could with my new friends in Mathare. My presence at the compound in Lavington was therefore increasingly sparse. Even when I was there, my head was in a different space. I was thoroughly consumed by my experiences over the past several weeks. I would even lie in bed awake, listening to my recordings, well into the early morning hours.

Jah Driver was by now quite explicit in his supplications; and I, increasingly forthcoming in my promises. A plan of action was beginning to congeal. First and foremost, I promised that I would stay in touch, and return soon, that I would not abandon them to their fate. I promised, as well, that together we would embark on a project of grass roots liberation, one that would center and promote the Rasta movement, in closest collaboration with the MSJC. It would somehow involve the Lea Mathare Learning Centre; and a commune in Juja, dedicated to cultivating skills in traditional arts and crafts; and a Matigari Reading Club; and it would seek to provide platforms for showcasing the talents of community reggae artists, too. The details of the project remained incredibly vague, even in my mind's eye. It was not at all clear to me how it was going to come together, but the more I promised, the more faith in me, and in the project, they seemed to have.

We were bound together by desperation, and, more likely than not, by delusions of grandeur. Not to mention, by the fact that I seemed willing to part ways, or otherwise come up with, a significant chunk of cash. All for the purpose of constructing what we were coming to call "Jah's Army," in which Jah Driver, Wanjau, Gregory, and Mama Africa were destined to be generals. For that purpose, they needed to be "liberated," they urged, so they could focus their energies on the collective struggle ahead. For the short term, at least, until we could figure out a way for the movement to become self-sufficient, self-determining. That was the end goal, of course. But the burning question on my mind was, how could this goal be prefigured, how could we avoid falling into the trap of establishing neo-colonial relations of co-dependency.

I had faced a similar predicament once before, with Flor. When I had taken up the task of trying to help her transcend the world of sex work. A sissifying, Sisyphean struggle, it turned out to be. One which ended up bringing me to the brink of financial destitution, and triggered my first mental breakdown. Though victories there were, for I did manage to influence Flor in her subsequent trajectory as a political activist, if not as a leader of the transgender movement, as I had once hoped and dreamed.

This time around, I had more to lose. For I had a wife and a son now. I simply could not afford to surrender my solvency and my sanity once more. But perhaps it was already too late.

A few days before I was scheduled to depart, Jah Driver, Esqualito, Wanjau, and I met up with Gacheke, for dinner, to discuss our evolving plans for the grass roots liberation project. There was a spot out by Dandora that Gacheke recommended, a place with real good barbecued meat, for cheap. We all met up at the MSJC, and hopped on a matatu to make our way out to the restaurant. I sat next to Gacheke on the bus, and we talked about the possibilities. He was energetic, as always, enthusiastic about our ideas.

We were in the midst of the conversation when, suddenly, we arrived at our stop. We had to hurry to make it off. I was last in line to exit. The matatu driver did not wait for me. He began to accelerate, while the guys encouraged me to jump. I leapt out, but lost my balance when I landed, and ended up tumbling into the deep ditch at the side of the road, full of streaming raw sewage. I was drenched, in stench, dripping with mud. But, most

fortunately, otherwise unharmed. It was a baptism of sorts, we declared.

Gacheke had on an undershirt, and was wearing a jumper, so he took his red collared shirt off his back, and offered it to me. We commemorated the occasion with a photo, by the side of the road, featuring the five of us, me in the middle, our arms interlocked in an embrace, our fingers coming together to make the Rasta sign for unity and oneness.

While we feasted, we continued to articulate the contours of the project. We were all so excited about its potential. As the evening wound down, Gacheke announced that he thought it would be a good idea for him to accompany me home, to help me explain to Johanna what we had been up to, and what had happened to my clothes. Despite all the implicit rules about class apartheid that had been rendered increasingly explicit over the previous few weeks, I nevertheless still somehow judged this to be a prudent course of action. Needless to say, Johanna was not impressed with my judgment.



We fought for the umpteenth time about what she considered my “bizarre” behavior. She was starting to suspect that I was suffering from a serious mental health condition. So she began to inquire more closely among my family and friends about my past. It’s not as if I had hidden from her too many details about my crisis back in 2012. It’s just that I told the story from my perspective, on my terms, in my terms, as having suffered an “existential rupture,” or even having transcended into a “messianic state.” I rejected such clinical terminology as “mania” or “bipolar.” I viewed these words as reductionist, indeed, as pathologizing rhetoric, pedalled by the medical establishment, in cahoots with the pharmaceutical industry, whose ultimate intention was to stigmatise, and to induce social control. I therefore refused to refer to myself or my experience in this way.

Johanna, however, is an epidemiologist by training, and the daughter of an engineer. Once she commenced to undertake her own independent inquiry into the matter, her conclusions were pretty easy to predict. Perhaps the only thing that is surprising is that she failed to question my narrative much at all before then. But once she had made up her mind about the “facts,” she was very angry, angry at me for being in denial, and angry at my friends and family for enabling me. Not to mention, for keeping her in the dark about my condition.

I was mad, too, me in both senses. The morning before we were supposed to travel back to Moshi, I packed my things, separated out a backpack full of essentials, took it with me, and set out for Mathare. I had decided to stay in Nairobi. But before I

left Lavington, I wrote her the following note:

“Johanna, please take this suitcase to Moshi. We will speak in due time about this extremely grave situation. But let me just stress that love is the foundation of every family. Without love, there can be no respect, no faith, no hope. I am feeling deeply wounded, angry, and scared about our future as a family. Your reaction to the events of these weeks has surprised and offended me. I pray that we can surmount this situation, and that with a little reflection, you will be able to find the love that you seem to have lost. Know that I will always love and respect you, your many virtues as both a mother and a human being. I only wish you could be more proud of being my wife. Peace and struggle, Jeff. Lavington, 31 August, 2018.”

We came bearing bananas and bottles of water this time, which we distributed like the eucharist amongst the children, blessing each of them on their foreheads in passing. They were ecstatic upon our arrival, as was I.

The conflict with Johanna seemed to have reached a denouement of sorts. I was overwhelmed with emotion. Deep down, I was writhing in the sharpest of pain. Though on the surface, at least, I was ebullient.

The kids had prepared some song and dance routines for us, a veritable talent show, in fact. They were extremely eager to perform. But before they did this, I gathered them around in a circle again. I noticed that there were yet more of them in the classroom today. I got them to tell the story of Joseph to me one more time. The storyteller this time was a young girl, about eight, by the name of Elsie Chamtavu. Her voice was soft, so soft, almost a whisper. She included in her version a focus on the nature of Joseph’s dreams. About how his brothers’ sheaves of grain bent down before his; and about how the sun and the moon and the eleven stars bowed down before him. I asked them if they ever dreamed, and if they believed in the power of dreams, and they responded with emphatic yeses. Then I told them the other night I dreamt I was a Rasta.

Just then, Baba Nesta appeared in the doorsill, his thick dreads flowing freely. “Jah, Rastafari!” he proclaimed.

“Just in time,” I replied, then shouted out: “Victory is ours!”

The kids screamed, in chorus: “Victory!”

Jah Driver stepped into the middle of the circle, and got them to sing along to the song, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” When this was finished, the kids started in with some of the performances they had prepared.

Baba Nesta was watching, from the corner of the room, with a big smile on his face. At a certain point, he decided to take over, started clapping, got the kids to clap along, before he burst out in song:

“Home born slave,  
Tell you I’m a home born slave,  
I’m a home born slave,  
Living in a shack-yard, slave.  
After some were born in chains,  
Crying in pain,  
Exported as slaves.  
Now reality reflect,  
Keep our memory in check,  
I tell you I’m a homeborn slave,  
In my mamaland, I say,  
I’m a homeborn slave.  
Enough is enough,  
We learn from the past.

We try not to forget,  
 Our roots and culture,  
 Always remember,  
 About how we are up against a war that will never end,  
 Yet what we are defending,  
 That which others are contending.  
 Oh I'm a home born slave.  
 Some are lodging in tents,  
 Squatters.  
 They are coming with police,  
 Giving us a test,  
 Wanting us to pack up and leave.  
 I'm crying that I'm a slave,  
 I'm a home born slave."

All the while, the children sang along so loudly, the refrain could be heard well beyond the room, echoing deep down into the valley: "Home born slave!"

More song and dance ensued. Along with poetry, too. Baba Nesta again intervened, to recite the following verse:

"Weep not black woman,  
 Wipe off your tears,  
 Stop living in fear,  
 Better must come, for sure.  
 Cheer, cheer, cheer Africa, cheer!  
 Cheer, cheer, cheer Africa, cheer!  
 I took a piece of paper and a pen, wrote a song, and  
 a poem.  
 Consoling someone afflicted, neglected, and rejected,  
 I just wanted to strengthen,  
 And give her courage.  
 Tell her, be blessed, blessed be you and your children,  
 Blessed be your healthy siblings,  
 Blessed like the daughter of Africa.  
 Cheer, Africa.  
 Cheer, Africa.  
 Weep not, black woman,  
 Wipe off your tears,  
 Stop living in fear,  
 Better must come, for sure.  
 Gentlewoman, quite so dark in color,  
 Pick up yourself, you who rose from sleepless slumber,  
 Show me potential, to go stand aback,  
 Shouting for freedom, in Africa,  
 Without suffer your gold and silver,  
 We still can lay a strong foundation,  
 Where black people are not beggars,  
 Where Africans are no longer sufferers.  
 Weep not, black woman,  
 Wipe off your tears,  
 Stop living in fear,  
 Better must come, for sure."

As the session was coming to a close, I began to feel increasingly repentant about the decision to stay on in Nairobi. I stepped outside and rang Johanna. The tone in her voice took me by surprise. There was no hint of anger; she simply sounded worried sick. I was moved. I tried to fight back the tears, but they came flowing out. I told her I was sorry for causing her so much anguish, and that I would be back in the evening.

I wiped the tears from my eyes, composed myself, and returned to the classroom. Esqualito was breaking down the beats for the kids, calling out to them, and getting them to respond: "Boom, bang, boom, boom, paka chen, boom, bang, bang, oh reggae,

boom, bang, bang." He was riling them up real good.

I announced: "Alright, well unfortunately, I have to be going. But I will be back very soon."

The kids wanted to know when I would return. I repeated, very soon, and promised them this was just the beginning. I told them that they had inspired me with all their talents. They politely requested that I bring them back books, and demanded that we chant down Babylon one last time. They cried out, at the top of their lungs, "Babylon! Babylon!"

When it was all over, we stepped out, and made our way back towards Juja Road. The guys were pumped up. "We are rocking the slums," Baba Nesta declared.

Jah Driver took hold of the recorder, and spoke: "Today, trodding inside slums, Jah Driver and Bobo Nesta, long-time friends, we are trodding, right about now, we are from Mathare, Lea, with the children, and I man, was experiencing, the innocence, lovely and glorious." He motioned to Baba Nesta, "So, what you call that, man? What can you say?"

Baba Nesta replied: "Inspiring, having little kids – them Jah, man – singing them tunes of Bob Marley, you know. That got to my heart. Them children wise, they know how to strengthen themselves. Them know, only Rastafari can liberate them!"

Esqualito intervened: "Big up, big man, all time. I man, Esqualito Pondekias, yea man, we are da-bridging Jeff, all the way out of California, him a University, Cambridge University, the man himself, Rastaman, some cultivation, for motivation, for the youth them, you seen?"

Jah Driver continued: "That was Fire Esqualito, and he's also a music teacher, yea man, best friend to Thomas Jeffrey, the Professor himself, the Professor coming in the prophetic way, and he's happy, he knows he's in his own land, man. Stepping in the Mount Zion. The Professor is running, the run-away boy, again, he's running away from home to come and have time with Rastamen, again, one more time!"

Esqualito chimed in: "Him a poor people defender!"

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Baba Nesta is a mystic, and a musician. By nearly all measures, a man with little time for politics. He was openly sceptical about the MSJC. But he seemed attracted to my manic edge, from the get-go. He had been touched, and was impressed, by the experience in the classroom. And he was intrigued about our plans to embark on a grass roots liberation project that would seek to center and promote the Rastafarian movement. He was willing and ready to participate. Though he wanted to reason with me about these plans, to make sure our project was grounded, was rooted, in an effort to foster consciousness about the way that Jah flows through us all, that is, in an attempt to expand "livity."

We set out for an Ethiopian restaurant near Eastleigh, where we had planned to meet up with Gacheke. Right next to the restaurant lived a friend of Jah Driver and Wanjau, whom they all called Stone. His grandfather had been a Mau Mau, an "original rebel," as Stone liked to put it. Stone was charismatic in his own right, a muscleman, and a gangster. Around his neck, he wore a thick gold chain with a solid gold pistol pendant, studded with diamonds. His main hustle was moving the high grade ganja, smuggled in from the Ethiopian highlands.

We knocked on the door. A young woman answered, and let us pass through a patio on which little toddlers were playing, through a narrow corridor, and back into a backyard, which was Stone's place of business. There were some seats lined up along the wall, and a low-hanging ledge. We sat down in a row, with Baba Nesta in the middle, ordered a few joints, lit up, and listened to him break it down for us.





Baba Nesta took several deep drags on one of the joints making the rounds, cleared his throat, and then began: "You know what they say, they say about Rastafari, not knowing Rastafari is the name of His Imperial Majesty. Rastafari is not a religion, Rastafari is not an institution, so there's no school that I'm gonna lead you, it's a calling from the Most High himself, I and I and I, Rastafari, called Rastafari."

"Rastafari!" repeated Wanjau, emphatically.

Baba Nesta continued: "I'm talking about Negus Negas, the Emperor himself, King Selassie I, who was crowned in 1930, Addis Ababa, yea man. And in 1966, he went to Jamaica. And before he went to Jamaica, he was in Kenya, with the old Mzee, Jomo Kenyatta. That was in 1964, when the Kenyan Parliament was first opened. He was the man who opened our Parliament. So I Rastafari, here in Kenya, I believe, and I know, this is the promised land. This is where I man belong. Enough brethren out in Babylon, them talk about repatriation, but I man, what I want is salvation."

"Negus Negas, Haile Selassie I, Jah, Rastafari! Baba Nesta getting spiritual!" intervened Jah Driver.

"Irie, man," Baba Nesta replied, before adding: "It is his Majesty who opened the seventh seal, the root of David. Yea man, none of them youths, in Babylon, when they hear Rastafari, talk about Rastafari. Rastafari is the King of Kings! King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, elect of Jah, who opened a book and looked, you know? Them talk about the root of David, His Imperial Majesty is the root of David, from the line of Solomon, Queen of Sheba, Mennelick the First, Mennelick the Second, then Emperor Haile Selassie I. And so, it is he, who seals. So if you hail the Sela, you see the I, and I, and I, Rastafari, Jah!"

"I think I follow you," I told him. Though truth be told, this was all a bit hard for me to swallow, even in the state in which I found myself. I still harboured serious reservations about the effort to

deify a man who had ruled as an earthly king. Sure, I could appreciate how Haile Selassie had come to resonate as a symbol of African resistance against Imperialism and fascism; and I could even subscribe to the idea that his 1963 address to the United Nations had been divinely inspired. After all, who could object to the wisdom, the prescience, of his words:

"that until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned;

that until there are no longer first class and second class citizens of any nation;

that until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes;

that until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race;

that until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never attained.

And until the ignoble and unhappy regimes that hold our brothers in Angola, in Mozambique and in South Africa in subhuman bondage have been toppled and destroyed;

until bigotry and prejudice and malicious and inhuman self-interest have been replaced by understanding and tolerance and good-will;

until all Africans stand and speak as free beings, equal in the eyes of all men, as they are in the eyes of Heaven;

until that day, the African continent will not know peace. We Africans will fight, if necessary, and we know that we shall win, as we are confident in the victory of good over evil."

Even so, I knew, too, that there were those who considered Haile Selassie a tyrant; that there was, indeed, considerable evidence that he had significantly abused his absolute power. Even more fundamentally, perhaps, the worship of a king, of any king, contradicted the very core of my radical democratic convictions. And so, for me, the least appealing part of Rastafarianism was arguably this key component of its theology. I was more of a mainstream millenarian Christian, I suppose, though very much open to an afro-centric spin.

But I wasn't in the mood for an argument with Baba Nesta about politics, or about apocalyptic theology. I wanted to see what I could learn from him instead. So I sought out common ground, and said: "The end times approach. He came as a lamb, he shall return as a lion, to deliver justice, just as promised by the God of Abraham. In fulfilment of the prophecies!"

Baba Nesta nodded his head, in approval, and added: "The stone that the builders refused, shall be the head cornerstone. And as long as I trod around the matatus, in the streets, I listen to the vibe, reggae music, Rastafari, the prophecy must fulfil, yea man, and the only good thing we can do to the young generation is to redeem them, by bringing a positive vibe."

"Spread the seed, spread the seed," I responded.

"Education first," Baba Nesta said in return. "You know Babylon, when them came, the first thing they did is to brainwash the people. So they come with religion. They teach the kids about their religion, some taught them to be Muslim, others taught them to be Christian, so there was a division. The beginning, they came, brainwashing the youths, so Rastafari is coming to cleanse them, to bring them I and I and I and I."

Again he had struck a chord with which I could not honestly agree. My preferred approach is to emphasize liberationist interpretations of, and potentials within, the Abrahamic religions. I felt particularly uncomfortable with his dismissal of Islam as an imperialist attempt to brainwash the people, especially given the demonization of it in the context of the Orwellian war on terror.

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But once more, I opted against engaging in dialectical confrontation, and instead merely replied: "We were lighting it up in there today, man. That's the true revolution, it's about revolutionising the consciousness."

"Babylon falls, Babylon go down, go down!" He laughed.

I laughed, too. But the note of dissonance stuck with me. Was not my failure to openly criticise what I deep down deemed problematic inconsistent with the very revolution in consciousness which I was proclaiming as the highest end? Perhaps I was getting carried away, by the pretension of prophecy, with a willingness to suspend my disbelief.

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There were other disturbing details within the Rasta culture to which I was exposed, that I, consciously or not, proved mostly willing to overlook at the time, caught up, as I was, in my wave of enthusiasm. For example, the blatant homophobia that manifest on occasions, contaminating my new friends' banter, corrupting their lyrics. A tendency to which I remained altogether aloof in person, but which stood out in sharp relief when I was transcribing my recordings. For instance, in one of the jam sessions in the den, Esqualito started chanting, "No battyman, no battyman! Fire, fire, fire!" And after he had finished, Jah Driver spoke into the recorder: "We burn battyman same time as we burn down Babylon. We don't like them here in our ghetto, we don't want them." There was much laughter. I neglected to ask to whom or what they were referring. Turns out that the word originated from Jamaica, and is an insult, meaning "a man who loves bottom."

I was saddened to discover this expression of hatred right in the middle of a session in which there had been so much emphasis on, and so much genuine sentiment of, "one love." It brought to mind a story that Flor once told me, about her friend Fernanda, a bleach-blond trans from Jujuy, "la Imperio." She was out late one night, in Madrid, on the way to a club, when a young Moroccan guy called out to her, "Hey Ramón, how pretty you look!" Fernanda walked straight over to the guy and slapped him in the face. The guy was stunned. He shouted at her, "You AIDS-infected piece of shit!" Fernanda shouted back: "I'd rather be blonde and die of AIDS at 30 than be a black bastard like you and live to 90." Divided and conquered they both were that night.

If the repertoire of masculinity hegemonic in the Rasta milieu in Mathare was thus heteronormative with a vengeance, so too was it patriarchal. This came across perhaps most clearly in Jah Driver's response to my conflict with Johanna. He had a hard time understanding my habit of telling him I would talk to my wife and get back to him before confirming plans. And an even harder time fathoming why I seemed, in the last instance, to treat her will as sovereign. He told me I would do well to keep in mind that it is written in the Book that wives should submit to their husbands as to the Lord. When I replied by trying to explain to him how Öcalan followed Maria Mies in considering women to be the first colony, and how Öcalan further claimed that the revolutions of the 21st century were destined to be led by women, Jah Driver just shook his head in disbelief. He was certainly receptive to the figure of Öcalan as a rebel and a freedom fighter, but was less on board with this crucial aspect of his message. In striking contrast, it must be noted, to some of the secular comrades in the MSJC.

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We made our way over to the restaurant, and sat at a round table towards the back. A giant map of Ethiopia adorned the golden-colored wall. Gacheke was there waiting. We ordered a big plate of injera, with lentils, greens, and beef, and shared the

meal amongst us. "The First Supper," we called it. We refused to consider it our last.

The vibe was electric, the conversation flowed. We spoke of auspicious beginnings. Gacheke emphasised the mantra, "educate, organise, liberate!" Baba Nesta added that reggae music provides an ideal medium for raising consciousness. "Reggae music gives African teachings," he stressed. "It teach us how to burn down Babylon." Jah Driver agreed, and took up the metaphor of planting seeds, pinpointing the core constituency of our grass roots liberation project in passing: "Through the orphans, the homeless, the hopeless, we are bringing hope and light to the future, chanting down Babylon together," he proclaimed. While Wanjau struck an internationalist chord, giving a shout out to the PKK, to the Palestinians, and to all peoples united in the struggle against oppression.

Then things got musical. Esqualito broke out in song, rhyming in Shang, with an English refrain:

"These streets I roam,  
Open to the world unknown,  
I wanna let go,  
But I find myself holding on;  
These streets I roam,  
Open to the world unknown,  
I wanna let go,  
But I find myself holding on.  
I wanna cry free."

Jah Driver then took up the mantle, and rapped:

"Too many women lying down in this city,  
The street life down there is not easy,  
Our children suffer, and so we are pity;  
Government rule them people, with impunity,  
No peace, no love, in our community,  
So we tell them, say, Jah Jah is the security.  
Selassie I, we here, wickedness can't prevail. Selassie II!"

And, of course, Baba Nesta intervened:

"Them hustle,  
Youth them hustling hard in the ghetto,  
And them youth they hustle,  
All of them hustle,  
Hustling hard,  
Imagine,  
Some wake up in the morning without food to eat,  
Neither money in your pocket to spread,  
I smart my mouth and pulled it in,  
Imagine,  
Seeing the children who are feeding ..."

I had gotten up from the table, slipped away to pay the bill. Upon my return, Baba Nesta looked up, and cut short his verse: "You are leaving?," he asked.

"Yea, I gotta go, man," I replied. "I have to go, because, my wife, man. I can't lose my child." This before adding: "But this is the beginning, man. I'm so fortunate to have met you guys. You guys are fucking real deal."

They prodded me to accompany them back to Stone's place for one last toke before my departure. I, not reluctantly enough, agreed. Baba Nesta was eager to run by me another theological argument, one that he considered crucial, before I was on my

way. It was about the question of paradise. He reasoned, in a this-worldly vein: "Man was created to inherit Eden, Adam and Eve were created in Eden, and Eden was on earth, so paradise is on earth. We don't need to go to heaven, we need to live and live and live." And Jah Driver chimed in, adding an emphasis on social justice: "Heaven is a state of mind," he claimed. "You know, to us, we believe that this life should be given privilege, you know? We give back to the society, we give back to the oppressed."

I took a long hit. I was on the verge of full-blown hallucination by now, and began to imagine that, at that very moment, I had ascended into the realm of paradise. I started singing – singing! – a classic by Peter Tosh: "Downpressor Man, where you going to run to, Downpressor man, where you going to run to ..."

And in unison, the group responded: "On judgment day!"

Then Baba Nesta joined in: "If you run to the rocks ..."

I replied: "The rocks will be melting!"

"If you run to the rocks," he repeated.

"The rocks will be melting!" I replied again, even more emphatically this time.

"If you run to the rocks," he repeated again.

"The rocks will be melting!" I shouted, this time at the top of my lungs.

And in unison, the group sang out again: "On judgment day!"

With fire in my eyes, and in my belly, now, I recounted for them one of my more edgy 'performances' from the days of the strike at Cambridge. I told them: "Indeed, judgment day approaches. There was this strike, in Babylon, at Cambridge. And we helped the kids to occupy the Old Schools. And the security guards fucking closed the door. There was a big gate, it was closed. And the students were there trying to get them to open the door. And the security guards, they wouldn't open the door. So what I did, is I fucking went up there, and I knocked on it, 'boom, boom, boom, boom, boom', and I shouted out, 'Little pig, little pig, let me in! Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin. Well I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in!'"

There was laughter. I continued: "The security guard wrote a five page letter complaining to the University, and they didn't know what to do with me. Whether or not I had committed some sort of sanction, some sort of sanctionable offence. They said I was abusing a worker. I was saying to those guards, I was screaming at them, I was saying, 'Whose university is this? Whose university is this? This belongs to the students. Why are you treating them like it's a prison? This is not a prison, this is a university! Who is your boss? Me? Or is it these corporate thugs who you're protecting? These criminals and these war-mongers! This won't stand! This university belongs to me!'"

There was more laughter. "You own it, man," said Baba Nesta. "You've got the power! Honor! The strength!"

I replied, "They were like, 'Oh my God, he's violent. He's violent. He's too angry.' I told them: 'You guys aren't angry enough!'"

Baba Nesta replied: "That reminds me, the other day, these folks at the Parliament here, were wearing these rebellious t-shirts. It was World Environmental Day. They had these t-shirts on, that read, 'coal ni sumu', which means, 'coal is toxic'. And they were wearing these masks, like skeleton masks, and they were screaming, 'Coal ni sumu! Coal ni sumu!' They were so much frightful. Who were these people, looking like dead men, on the street, in Nairobi, proclaiming, 'Coal ni sumu!?' Now I overstand, they were sent from above, straight to I and I, just like you!"

We finished our last round of joints. I told them again I had to leave, this time for real. They gathered around me, and Baba Nesta laid his hands on me, and prayed: "As it was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end. King Alpha and Omega,

beginning without end, first without last, Almighty God. Jah give, let His castle guide you. Jah be with you until we meet again! Godspeed! One love! Rastafari!"

I answered: "One love! One destiny! One prophecy! One God!"

They shouted out: "One people!"

I called out, even louder, again: "One love!"

The Uber was waiting outside. As I stepped in it, they surrounded the car, and chanted: "Rastafari! Rastafari and I and I and I and I and I and I!"

"To auspicious beginnings, my friends!" I hollered back at them, out the car window. "Peace and love, guys! And struggle!" My heart was pounding, my head was spinning. And just like that, I was whisked away, back to the world of Lavington. We left for Moshi in the morning.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZR0BMR5L7A>

## Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley

Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley (thomas.j.miley@gmail.com) is a Lecturer of Political Sociology at the University of Cambridge. He is a patron of Peace in Kurdistan and a member of the executive board of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC). He has published broadly on struggles for self-determination. He is co-editor of *Your Freedom and Mine. Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdogan's Turkey* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2018).

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Peace in Kurdistan is involved in a collaborative project in which, together, we are trying to envisage what self-determination can and must mean in the 21st century. We are interested in making connections between struggles for self-determination around the globe. We take our inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's re-articulation of self-determination. Öcalan has emphasised that "the propagation of grass roots democracy is elementary." We encourage people to send relevant original articles for inclusion in this new series.

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