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Williams, Prince Elijah. *Book of Memory: A Rastafari Testimony*.

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Prince Elijah Williams; Michael Kuelker, editor

Book of Memory: A Rastafari Testimony

St. Louis: CaribSound Ltd. 2004, 425 pp

Reviewed by Monique Bedasse-Samuda

The Rastafari Movement in Kingston Jamaica (1960) by Rex Nettleford, M. G. Simpson and Roy Augier was written and published at the request of Rastafarians who wished to correct common misunderstandings about the Rastafarian movement. Though the researchers engaged in “reasonings” with Rastas in their attempt to grasp the rudiments of the movement, their work, not unlike other scholarly endeavors that followed, looked at Rastafari through specific frameworks and paradigms, which did not sufficiently engage the perspectives of Rastafarians themselves. Many excellent works, which attempted to place Rastafarians at the center of their analyses, still left Rastas with the general feeling that Rasta is largely misunderstood and frequently misrepresented.

In recent years Rastafarians have attempted to fill a void in the literature by offering an insider’s viewpoint. Rastafarians such as Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah in *Rastafari: the New Creation* (2002), and Douglas R. A. Mack in *From Babylon to Rastafari: Origin and History of the Rastafarian Movement* (1999) have begun to provide a much needed inside-out perspective with their works on Rastafari. They set the stage for the emergence of *Book of Memory: A Rastafari Testimony*.

Book of Memory is a departure from typical works on Rastafari in that it offers a “message of Rastafari” (11) based on the personal testimony of one Rastafarian man, Prince Elijah Williams. The editor, Michael Kuelker, explains his methodology through the “notes of context” that he injects at certain points throughout the text. Kuelker declares that with the help of a battery-operated recorder, he recorded Prince’s “deliberate speech” and “reasoning,” allowing the story to unfold “the way memory does” (11). In addition, through these “notes,” Kuelker provides useful background information to some of the events described by Prince, and his elegant prose serves to draw the reader deeper into the world that Prince portrays. Despite his mark on the work, Kuelker manages not to “hang Rastaman’s oral history on . . . [his] own conceptual scaffolding,” but to create a text with Prince’s “design” (12). The result is the personal story of a Rastaman, in his own words and at his own pace.

Though variance within Rastafari disallows a personal account that is wholly representative of the movement, Prince is easily placed among the downtrodden of Jamaica, for whom Rastafari speaks. His story is at once personal and collective, as he roots his autobiography within the context of Jamaica’s history of enslavement and colonialism. *Book of Memory* is about the reconstruction of Jamaica’s history from the standpoint of the marginalized. Its title appropriately symbolizes the work’s overarching aim, which is a call to memory. This

theme functions on several levels as Prince beckons to Jamaicans not only to remember their African roots and their history, but to recall the ways in which that history has been distorted by the colonial powers. Prince speaks his testimony from the silence of the board house he inhabits, and his story becomes central to a narrative under contestation. A blatant challenge to Jamaica's mainstream historical record lies in the treatment of the Coral Gardens incident of April 1963. Both Prince and Kuelker posit that this incident, in which some Rastafarians clashed with the Jamaican authorities, should be hailed as an important landmark in Jamaica's history generally and the history of Rastafari, specifically. Furthermore, the work deals with how the incident is remembered, as the notion that Rastafarians are violent, irrational vagrants has much to do with how this altercation has been interpreted.

In keeping with his Rastafarian philosophy, Prince tells his story as an African residing in Jamaica temporarily. For him and other Rastafarians, Jamaica represents Babylon, as it is a part of the "system of the colonial powers that rule the universe" (10). Jamaica is where he "stay[s] at the moment," and for him "repatriation is a must" (10). His Rasta philosophies lie at the core of who he is and all that he does. In discussing the plight of Africans in Jamaica, Prince insists that, "Africa is straining to the ears of Africans who don't know they are African;" he believes that "this is what is bothering the people" (229). *Book of Memory* appeals to the cultural memory of Africans in Jamaica and its oral character serves to challenge Jamaica's (written) mainstream historical narrative.

The unflinching orality of the text is a refreshing and well-needed addition to the literature on Rastafari. As an oral culture, Rastafari is definitely at home here. Rastafarian philosophy emphasizes the power of the spoken word and this is confirmed by Prince who declares that the spoken word "dwell[s] among man" (229). As Rastafari is a decentralized movement without a written constitution, the spoken word remains the only medium through which Rastafarian thought is expressed. The word functions in two capacities: as the means by which the Rastafarian worldview is articulated, and as a means of reinforcing the Rasta critique of Babylon through the use of Rasta language.

Speaking in Jamaican patois, Prince invites the reader into a specific cultural milieu that makes the work as anti-establishment as Rastafari itself. In his commentary, Kuelker highlights the politics of language and acknowledges, "patois is a skin, a home, a place with tradition, where self and community inhabit" (281). Prince presents a vivid, authentic picture of his world and Rastafari is aptly illuminated within the syntax, cadence, and mechanics of the language that give it expression. So, the work relies heavily upon the Rastafarian lexicon, which provides insights into the Rastafarian critique of European cultural hegemony. Language is an extremely important theme of the work as it is strongly connected to Rastafari's rejection of colonial sensibilities. Prince's pervasive use of "I-an-I" and other I-words demonstrates his entrenchment in the Rastafarian lexicon. The Rastafarian subversion of colonial sensibilities through language is also evident in Prince's use of words such as "downpression," which underscores that there is nothing *uplifting* about "oppression."

Book of Memory rejects the colonial mentality of Jamaican society, which hails the Jamaican Standard English as the only acceptable standard of communication. Such relics of British cultural superiority are certainly not lost on Prince and Rastafari, in general. Prince understands how and why such oppressive ideals are perpetuated throughout Jamaican society and acknowledges that the formal educational system is an influential tool in this endeavor. He knows that “no part of Marcus Garvey handed down inna Jamaica educational institution” (39). Prince’s own wisdom, which is evident throughout the text, does not come from the educational system in Jamaica since he was “never educated by Babylon” (39). His impressive knowledge of the Bible, his consciousness and his profound understanding of Jamaican politics all defy even his own father’s belief that he was a “dunce-dunce youth” (39). Prince’s sophisticated grasp of current events, including the specifics of political initiatives such as Michael Manley’s land lease program, demonstrates the perspicuity of a Rastaman who is not formally schooled, but obviously self-educated. His wisdom allows him to see the trickery of Babylon, which is important to the Rastafarian critique.

Crucial to Prince’s exploration of the evils of Babylon is his look at the role of Christianity. He acknowledges the deceptive way in which Christianity has been used as a tool of European enslavers and colonizers. Prince argues that when European colonizers traveled to “the villages of Africa, when they go to preach Christianity to the people, this is how the prayer thing come in: shut your eye and pray. When your prayer done . . . and you open your eyes, you’re under shackle” (36). With specific reference to the process by which Africans were transported from Africa to Jamaica, Prince maintains that “most of the people who come here didn’t know they were coming as slaves . . . when they closed their eyes to say their prayer, foot and hand shackle” (36). Prince’s palpable reverence for the Bible, underscored by his impressive ability to quote the scriptures, may appear to contradict his critique of Christianity. Yet, what Prince rejects is what he perceives to be a misuse and misunderstanding of Christianity. Exactly how the Bible and Christianity fit into Rastafari thought remains a point of contention within the movement. But, Rastas generally agree that Rastafari, unlike mainstream Christianity, “is the only religion telling people that *they can live!* The rest of the religion telling people about dying” (87).

Book of Memory stresses the significant concept of Rastafari “livity” well. While Prince clearly thinks of Rasta as a religion, his conception of religion differs from mainstream Christianity, as he believes that “anytime you talk about God, mahn, you haffi talk about your wife or your pickney-dem or the world, everything that has life” (314). *Book of Memory* reflects this philosophy because it is a story about Prince’s life. For Prince, Rasta means that the sacred and the secular merge, and it is obvious that every aspect of his daily life relates to his philosophies as a Rastaman. From the foods that he eats and his belief that all human ailments can be treated with the “herbs of the earth,” to his traditional Jamaican carvings, which are clearly rooted in a West African style, Rastafari pervades Prince’s life. Kuelker writes that even

when Prince listens to the radio, “it is as a Rastaman, an either/or choice, socio-political talk radio shows or African Diaspora cultural programming” (14).

Book of Memory is a valuable work that offers the rare voice of a Rastafarian, in his own words. In sharing the nature of his “livity,” Prince touches on spirituality, politics, love, male/female relationships, Christianity, gender issues, violence, diet, sustainable development, repatriation to Africa and Haile Selassie. He gives his opinions on controversial matters within Rastafari such as the role of Jesus Christ, white Rastafarians and whether one has to have dreadlocks in order to be a Rasta. Prince urges his readers to recall that in the final analysis, “Rasta word” is about “life fi di people. Respect for the people,” and the belief that “nah man a bigger man, nah man a better man” (40). At the end of the interviewing process, Prince assures Kuelker that “the half has never been told.” This statement is meaningful on two levels: it reflects Prince’s belief (shared by many Rastafarians) that much of Rastafari constitutes esoteric knowledge, and it also speaks to the yearning within the study of Rastafari for more works like this. The field begs for similar works that will provide a more complete picture of Rastafari in its varied manifestations. Other such contributions will ensure that different viewpoints within Rastafari are represented, including those of Rastawomen. Kuelker is to be commended for his vision and commitment to the value of an oral message of Rastafari, and Prince is to be lauded for providing us with a sample of Rasta “livity.”