

How I Learned African History from Reggae

Angela Walters

I was raised in northern New Mexico, a white girl in a predominantly Hispanic population. The public education I received in this small southwestern town was somewhat unusual, as it reflected the cultural diversity within at least our own community. So although I was subjected to the traditional Western canon, and plodded through Shakespeare, the American Revolution, and the diagramming of English sentences, the community made sure that I learned some Spanish and some aspects of Mexican culture as well. In elementary school I made skeletons from colored construction paper and paste to commemorate the Mexican Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. Later, my classmates and I listened, enthralled, to stories of ancient Aztec warriors being sacrificed on altars to appease the feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. By the time I graduated from high school I was nearly as familiar with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as I was with the Declaration of Independence, and I celebrated Cinco de Mayo, Mexican Independence Day, as well as the Fourth of July.

While my background was unusual in one way, in that my education was largely bicultural, it was not unusual in another. Throughout my childhood I learned no in-depth history of Africa or African-descended people outside the occasional civil rights curriculum around Martin Luther King. While we were taught that he was a hero because he was a proud and non-violent man, we were also taught, perhaps inadvertently, that the struggle for civil rights for African Americans and the struggle for equitable relations between blacks and whites—which was a U.S. struggle alone—had reached its appropriate zenith with his life. I believed this, because after we were taught about Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination some 15 years earlier, nothing more was said about African Americans today or about the peoples of Africa or the African diaspora.

If Mexican history was considered a strong river running alongside, and often intertwining with, the river of U.S. history, then African history was like a muddy stream one hardly noticed. And because there was not a single black family living in our little town, this muddy stream became my primary source of knowledge about Africa and the African diaspora. African history was diminished and made to fit into less than nine weeks of my tenth-grade U.S. history class. African history began with the Middle Passage and ended with the civil rights movement. Although we were taught that slavery was morally indefensible, the social and political foundations of the European colonization and exploitation of Africa were never discussed, and I consequently never considered what the profound ramifications of such a massive, protracted exploitation might be for Africa or the African diaspora.

Angela Marie Walters, a part-time student of Lisa Brock at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque in 1995, chose this essay topic for a class assignment. Brock selected the essay as a contribution to a special journal issue she edited. A freelance writer and mother, Walters is interested in multicultural issues and how they affect contemporary American society.

Excerpted from "How I Learned African History from Reggae," in "African [Diaspora] Studies," edited by Lisa Brock, special issue, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 24, no. 2 (1996). Reprinted by permission of the African Studies Association. Lyrics are from Peter Tosh, "I Am That I Am," *Equal Rights* (Columbia Records, 1977), and Papa Levi, "Mi God, Mi King," *Reggae Greats: The DJ's* (Mango/Island Records, 1985).

I had a lot more to learn about Africa and her people, but it would not be taught to me in school.

Don't belittle my authority
It's time you recognized my quality
I said I am that I am
I am I am I am
—Peter Tosh, “I Am That I Am”

While searching one day through my mother's rather eclectic music collection, I came across the album *Kayo* by Bob Marley and the Wailers. Intrigued by the long dreadlocks and open smile Marley wore on the cover photograph, I listened to the album and was immediately absorbed by the music's slow and sensual rhythm, its heavy bass tones, and Marley's melodic, amiable voice. Though *Kayo* is one of Marley's least political albums, the experience of listening to it served for me as initiation into a new community, a community consisting of individuals actively involved in the project of creating for themselves their own identity. Because this identity is a distinctly *black* identity, and is in part rooted in African history and culture, discovering reggae was for me tantamount to discovering a whole new world.

I had never conceived of precolonial Africa as anything other than a dry and expansive wasteland inhabited by either savages or idiots. These images were not my own; they were gleaned from many years of exposure to media portrayals of African people, from novels like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or movies like *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, in which native Africans possess a sort of endearing ignorance and little culture to speak of. By contrast, songs such as Mutabaruka's “Great Queens of Africa” furnished me with unprecedented images of African people as shrewd and resourceful, emanating from a culture and tradition that was vigorous, glorious, irrepressible.

Reggae also caused me to consider for the first time the phenomenon of slavery from an Afrocentric perspective, rather than the Eurocentric perspective, far more comfortable for whites, that I was accustomed to. I was shocked into a new, often afflicted, consciousness from songs such as “Mi God Mi King” by Papa Levi, who sings:

They take 'way mi gold, they take mi silver.
Them hang me up and rape mi muddah
They take me from the wonderful land of Africa,
To slave for the plantation owner. They take
'way mi name and call me “nigguh.”
The only word me know: “Aye's a comin, massuh.”
And then they say we ignorant and inferior
And owe them intelligence and superior
To the complexion of them skin color.

“Mi God Mi King” and other reggae songs like Third World's “96 Degrees in the Shade” or Burning Spear's “Do You Remember the Days

of Slavery?” challenged me to look upon the raw actuality of our country’s past with my eyes open. Slavery is ugly, it hurts me to look at it, but I suspect that the damage accrued from refusing to look is greater still.

The education I received from reggae was well-rounded. Apartheid was exposed as a virulent instrument of oppression and dehumanization in Alpha Blondy’s “Apartheid Is Nazism,” Peter Tosh’s “Fight Apartheid,” and countless other reggae songs. I first learned of Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment in South Africa not in school but from Yellowman’s song “Free Mandela.” It was Bob Marley’s *Survival* album that introduced me to the concept of Pan-Africanism. And Judy Mowatt’s song “Black Woman” caused me to reflect upon the moral, physical, and psychological pain suffered by countless black women at the hands of white violators.

Though much of the information I have assimilated from reggae is undoubtedly painful, concerning a past that is rife with discrimination and disfranchisement, an equally significant impression I have received from reggae is that the African diaspora has not merely endured the atrocities of history but thrived despite them. Reggae musicians attribute a large part of their strength to Africa and a conception of African history that reaches far beyond the beginning of European colonization. Reggae musicians evoke a time when Africa existed solely for itself, for Africans, a continent rich with resources, tradition, science, art, and personalities free from shackles.

In school, African history is always taught only insofar as it relates to European history, and never *for itself*. And though we, as white people, may perceive that the treatment Africa received from our ancestors was clearly wrong, I believe there inevitably exists for many the remnant of thought that Africa and the African diaspora are inferior, and subordinate, to European history and people of European descent. This remnant of thought seems inevitable because of our collective Western persistence in refusing to perceive the world with anything other than a Eurocentric perspective, which, when not balanced with an Afrocentric perspective, presents a skewed conception of history and our place in it. Everywhere one looks, whether in school textbooks, the national news, or movies and television, one sees portrayals of the African diaspora that are distorted by the veil of racism.

Reggae musicians subvert the negative misrepresentations of the African diaspora in part by engaging in a *retelling* of African history that is at once more subjective, more complete, and more authentic. Reggae musicians are a few of the many who are actively involved in the project of disseminating the stories of African history: stories of history and culture, stories of slavery, racism, and struggle, stories of freedom, dignity, and victory. The sharing of these stories would seem to disarm racism of much of its power. And unlike many forums utilized for the retelling of African history, reggae is a part of popular culture and is primarily heard among youth, which is perhaps the ideal place to confront racism.

I thank God I found reggae music. For a long while it was reggae alone that injected living blood into what was for me the dead flesh of African history. It was reggae that led me to African American history and studies. And it was reggae that ultimately exposed the smug and elusive veil of racism

I viewed the world behind, the veil I wore without knowing or choosing. In exposing the veil, reggae *destroyed* the veil, and it is for this reason I hope that reggae musicians continue to, in the words of Bob Marley, “tell the children the truth,” and I hope the children continue to listen.

Bob Marley’s Pan-African Consciousness

Jamaican reggae icon Robert Nesta Marley infused themes of African history and Pan-African solidarity and pride throughout his music. Bob Marley and the Wailers performed “Zimbabwe,” from the album *Survival* (1979), at Zimbabwe’s independence celebration in 1980.

Every man got a right to decide his own destiny.
And in this judgment there is no partiality.
So arm in arms, with arms, we’ll fight this little struggle,
'Cause that’s the only way we can overcome our little trouble.

Brother, you’re right, you’re right,
You’re right, you’re right, you’re so right!
We gon’ fight, we’ll have to fight,
We gonna fight, fight for our rights!

Natty Dread it in-a Zimbabwe,
Set it up in Zimbabwe,
Mash it up-a in-a Zimbabwe,
Africans a-liberate Zimbabwe. . . .

In “Africa Unite,” on the same album, Marley proclaims Pan-African solidarity.

Africa unite!
'Cause we’re moving right out of Babylon,
And we’re going to our Father’s land.

Africa unite
Africa unite
Unite for the benefit for the benefit of your people!
Unite for it’s later than you think!
Unite for the benefit of my children!
Unite for it’s later than you think!
Africa awaits its creators!
Africa awaiting its Creator!
Africa, you’re my forefather cornerstone!
Unite for the Africans abroad
Unite for the Africans a yard! [at home]

“Zion Train” is from *Uprising* (1980), the last album to be released before the singer’s death from cancer in 1981. It pays homage to the history of African-descended peoples:

Two thousand years of history
Could not be wiped away so easily.
Two thousand years of history (black history)
Could not be wiped so easily.

Oh, children, Zion train is comin’ our way; get on board now!
They said the Zion train is comin’ our way.
You got a ticket, so thank the Lord!