Introduction

Rasta Ivey, one of the oldest living Rastafari women, recalled defending her faith despite being ridiculed and sent to an asylum for the insane. Another elder Rastafarian described how, before her twelfth birthday, she began hearing the voices of Christ and Haile Selassie I telling her about Africa and slavery. Her mother thought she was on the verge of lunacy. Brother Yendis remembered when, as a preadolescent during the 1940s, he saw a Rastafari man accosted by a belligerent policeman for no apparent reason. This incident led him to learn more about the Rastafari, as he questioned what made them so threatening. Today, the three remain as committed as ever to their Rastafari faith and identity, even though the paths that each followed to become Rastafari and their relationships to other Rastafari vary. What led them and others to embrace a stigmatized identity and become Rastafari? Why are Africa, slavery and injustice, and a language of redemption so prominent in the Rastafari self-concept and worldview?

A small but growing number of people began to identify themselves in the 1930s as adherents of Haile Selassie I, whom they viewed as an incarnation of God. These Rastafari, however, were concerned with more than religion. They were also concerned with racial redemption and the political concerns this entailed. Thus, we can very generally describe the Rastafari as a religiously and racially conscious people, many of them subscribing to some strain of the protean ideologies of Black nationalism. As Rastafari poet Mutabaruka explains it, Rastafari is a Black power ideology with a “theological nucleus” (2006:27). Within two years of their emergence, the British began spying on the Rastafari because of their anticolonial talk; within 30 years, elite Jamaicans had deemed them a threat to national security; and by the early 1970s, the Rastafari had become exemplars of Black culture noted for their caustic social commentary. The Rastafari are best known in the popular mind for their dreadlocks, their use of marijuana as a sacrament, and their contributions to the Jamaican
popular music, reggae. Academics and others have depicted the Rastafari as deviants, delusional, or a liberatory vanguard. I offer a different depiction and approach. One primary concern involves explaining the evolution of a positive and morally configured formulation of Blackness and Black identity and the ways it has been variously used by the Rastafari and others. Another concern involves connecting the evolution of racialized collectivities with the experience of individuals, and the cultural resources and identity work that they separately and together entail. A third concern involves racial identity generally: how it works, and how the interaction between people, social memory, and history give it life. My account of how and why people become Rastafari is also a story of how a social movement is made. This is a fainter dialogue than the other three. But, like a conversation occurring at the next table, if you focus your attention, you can make out what is going on.

Race is central to the stories my narrators told me about becoming Rastafari. Although I could also give religion the central position in the Rastafari identity complex, I believe it is reasonable to treat the two as co-dependently central because religion, too, is racialized, along with other important identity markers such as justice and righteousness. I have sought in these pages to develop a many-sided perspective on identity—historical, social, and personal—an approach attentive to the mutual influences between “biography and history,” and “self and world” (Mills, 2000:4).

On the one side, there are the stories and memories that elder Rastafari tell about their personal identity. When my interlocutors told me about their pathways into Rastafari, often I could feel the past, the ill will of the malicious police officer, the smugness of colonial administrators and litigators, ridicule from associates and strangers, and their conviction that becoming Rastafari was the right thing to do. These identity stories are more than the accounts of independent individuals. They and their stories are social and historical products, portals into the past, present, and larger world. From another side, this book is a narrative of ethnogenesis, an account of the birth and evolution of a new collectivity, the Rastafari. By considering the experience of people coming to attach themselves to and identify with a collectivity, we can also gain insight into the complex and unpredictable nature of how groups and social or collective identifications form and evolve out of interactions and collisions between people and things. From yet another side, we are interested in the history and cultural resources that provide the material that people use to fashion morally configured Black identities such as Rastafari.
I suspect that some readers might be interested primarily in the Rastafari experiences and voices and others in the conceptual frameworks used to situate their voices and my analysis. I ask readers, however, to consider both to be important, and inseparable, to an understanding of racial formation, ethnogenesis, and how individuals position themselves in relation to both.

Race Formation and the Development of a Morally Configured Black Identity

I came to see, to know, that we [Black people] have been crucified since we arrived in this land [Jamaica]. So it go... We [Rastafari] are the ancients here today, to continue that trod of Isaiah, Daniel, Elijah, Jeremiah, Moses, David, Solomon... it is our prophets and warriors in this land who come before us and tell the people that iniquity must done [end], that our people must be free... it is that same Tacky and Cuffy and Nanny and Bogle [who led insurrections for liberation and justice]... and Rasta come take it up [and carry it forward].

(Rasta Ivey)

If we want to know how and why people become Rastafari, we must search out the lineages and history of the cultural resources they use to create their identity. This requires answering a broad question: How did Blackness and its various permutations—especially the morally configured ones—develop in Jamaica and persist to the present? Chapter 1 knits together an answer to this question.

Blackness in Jamaica evolved through pan-ethnic assimilation and consolidation. A common linguistic, religious, and racial framework crystallized and became the context for socialization and identification as various African ethnic, religious, linguistic, and regional identifications faded away. Race formation—the acts though which people use institutions, history, ideas, policies, and specific practices to make race socially significant (Omi & Winant, 1986)—has been a fundamental aspect of the development of Blackness in Jamaica and elsewhere. Blackness has shown itself to be a remarkably durable and compelling source of identification in Jamaica. It is a dynamic condition, worldview, and cluster of cultural resources flexible enough to serve many purposes.

Blacks are defined here as Africans and their descendants brought to the “New World.” White Europeans' assigned to them the racial category
“Black” (and “Ethiopian”). Assignment of an identity does not mean that people necessarily accept that identity or that, even in the case of acceptance, it will be interpreted as the inscribers intended. However, when the power to impose an identity is strong enough, and the means extensive enough, categorization can influence a person’s self-concept. Prevailing White designations of Blackness often have been disparaging and vituperative, and always less than flattering. It is not surprising that many people labeled Black have sought to avoid, ignore, or reject the label.

Yet, as early as 1700, we can identify efforts to define Blackness in religious, moral, and affirmative ways, suffusing the category with a different content. A religiously inspired Congolese woman in São Salvador, Congo, claimed that Christ had appeared as a Black man, that his Apostles too were Black, and that São Salvador was Bethlehem and Congo God’s new Kingdom (Spencer, 1999:3,172).

As an ascribed category, Blackness is ethnicized through people’s self-identification and claim on the category. Such claims typically emphasize beliefs in a shared homeland, history, “blood,” and experience (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). What makes this real and enduring is not genes and inheritance, but social memory, feelings, and self-awareness. Being and becoming Black involves mutual engagement between the ascribed category and the feeling and awareness of Blackness from a personal perspective. “You see,” said 85-year-old Sister Mariam, “through the Garvey people I come to love Black people, [because] I see we inna the same lot even though some [Black people] carry on like them different.” Although much emphasis is put on phenotype (e.g., skin color, facial features, and hair texture), Blackness is really a cultural phenomenon that acquires meaning through symbols, ideas, practices, and the ways in which these intersect with people’s sense of shared history and experience. Music, food preferences, language, art, phenotype, beliefs about origins, kinship, and worldview, and a history of subjugation and marginalization are some of the primary themes that may define formations of Blackness.

Blackness in Jamaica has many permutations, and we will focus on one particular orientation, a morally configured and affirmative understanding of Blackness that is prone to politicization, both by those who subscribe to the identity and those who contest it. Morally configured Blackness has been profoundly informed by religious understandings, both African and Christian, and sustained by a racial moral economy that has given character to understandings of “rightness” and rights as these relate to livelihood and freedom.
Ethnogenesis and Complexity: 
The Making of a People and a Collective Identification

A handful of evangelists helped catalyze what has grown into a complex identity and full-fledged people who now imagine themselves as a nation. Who would have imagined in 1941, when founding Rastafari evangelist Leonard Howell’s commune was raided by police, that the Rastafari present that day, and others like them, would evolve into a collectivity that would significantly influence how Jamaicans conceived of Blackness and the power of liberation through self-transformation?

In chapter 2, I tap theories of complexity to augment my account of the ethnogenesis of the Rastafari. By drawing our attention to the birth and evolution of a people, the ethnogenesis approach offers us the opportunity to delve into the dynamics of collective identity formation, especially the social interactions, conflict, disruptions, and unanticipated outcomes involved. I combine the focus on ethnogenesis with the concepts of “perturbation” and “self-organization,” in order to emphasize the contingency, unpredictability, and increasing complexity involved in Rastafari ethnogenesis. Perturbations are not simply crises; they involve disruption of evolutionary trajectories, change business as usual, and may lead to new practices and understandings resulting from a need to adapt to new situations or challenges. Self-organization points us toward solutions to the mysterious: how did the Rastafari continue to grow in numbers and influence without a plan or some guiding force? How do the activities and experiences of individuals connect with this evolving sense of collective identity? Consider, for a moment, the connection between Ras Jayze’s experience, and the larger conflict between the Rastafari and other Jamaicans during the late 1950s:

Warriors, we had to be. A police break off him baton ’pon me head. I had no weapon. Only word, sound, and power [a Rastafari belief that words and sounds have emancipative, healing, and protective powers]. That was all we used against them Babylon. It was so powerful them had to attack we. The power and presence of the Rasta burned them. Everyone was against we. And we had to be against them. Persecution came from the state, the police, the church, the family.

Personal experience such as Ras Jayze’s provided the basis for collective identity and personal perception. Persecutors, real and imagined, played an important part in the identity work of the Rastafari.
Because ethnogenesis is far more complex than the neat narratives that people create to tell their history, I focus on disruptive and watershed moments in Rastafari ethnogenesis. These moments allow us to see plainly things like contending and shifting constructions of identity, symbols and meaning, and struggles around control and power. The watershed events that are a focus of chapter 2 marked milestones in the Rastafari's sense of themselves and how they were perceived by the public, how they collectively transitioned from pariahs to exemplars of Black culture and history.

Between Peoplehood and Social Movement

The word Rastafari is often followed by “movement,” and several of my Rastafari interlocutors also apply the term to themselves. If The Rastafari, however, remain a social movement, they must be among the most long-lived! My view is that “movement” describes only part of what some of the Rastafari are involved in. There are those working to attain recognition as a religion, those working on legalizing cannabis as a sacrament, or those working on repatriation. I cannot remember hearing the oldest Rastafari like Rasta Ivey, Brother Dee, or Sister Mariam use movement to refer to themselves. They commonly spoke of “Rasta people,” not the “Rasta movement.” On the other hand, “movement” is still regularly used by those who became Rastafari during the late 1950s and after. Different generations of Rastafari have developed understandings of how to think of the collectivity and its various efforts. Many of my narrators were or remain involved in activities that we could call “political,” such as agitating for official recognition as “Ethiopians.” However, these Rastafari represent only a part of the Rastafari, albeit a key part.

What is baffling about the Rastafari as a collectivity has been their numerical growth and appeal, which have not relied on typical methods of recruitment. Ras Sam Brown told me that “You cannot join Rastafari. It is not something you join. That is foolishness. It is something inside of you, an inspiration that come forward.” A person, in most cases, makes a conscious, deliberate decision to become Rastafari and grows into the identity through a potentially challenging identity transformation process. Acquiring and internalizing the Rastafari identity is not the end of the process, since continued commitment to it is largely in the hands of the convert (not that autonomous free will is at work). So, there must be something
deeply appealing and satisfying about Rastafari identity. Brother Barody, when reflecting on his journey into Rastafari, regularly recalled his memories of the Rastafari of the early 1950s: “I look at them and see how they do things. How they talk to each other, and say ‘peace and love’ and those things. I did notice that . . . [even though] they say the Rasta are violent and not to be trusted.”

Rastafari has much in common with “prefigurative” social movements in that the Rastafari identity (and its cultural complex) provides ideas for people experimenting with different ways of relating and living: people begin trying to model personally the society that they want to live in (e.g., Cashmore, 1979; Jasper, 1997; Poletta, 2002; Graeber, 2004). Movements like Rastafari have often been tagged as escapist and politically ineffective (e.g., R. Smith, 1997:xvi). This may be true if we assess the Rastafari from the standpoint of conventional politics. But the Rastafari show us a non-conventional politics, the kind of collective power described in Poor People’s Movements, a power that gains traction through its capacity to threaten disruption of business as usual (Piven & Cloward, 1979; Piven, 2006). However, the Rastafari use “quiet power,” their alternative model of being and relating, to persuade others. They did not seek state power or largess; yet, the Jamaican government sponsored a delegation to Africa to explore repatriation, and the People’s National Party (PNP) used Rastafari language and symbols to communicate with constituents, suggesting the power of the Rastafari at different times.

Many observers believe that Rastafari movements have been “disorganized” and “lacking in leadership” (e.g., Smith et al., 1960:18). This view rests upon the inappropriate assumption that decentralization and ideological diversity are signs of weakness and instability rather than a form of adaptation with particular strengths. Decentralization and diversity mitigate state suppression, creating a range of “niches” that a group can penetrate, and encourage dynamism and innovation (Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Linebaugh & Rediker, 1990; Kebede & Knotterus, 1998; Price, Nonini, & Foxtree, 2008). They add to the survival and persistence of vulnerable groups in ways that centralization and bureaucratization impede. There is salience in the Rastafari’s arguments against centralization and in favor of indigenous anarchism. Although diffuseness may protect against efforts to root out completely a movement or people, it leaves them susceptible to divide-and-conquer strategies and can lead to detrimental competition between different groups (Edmonds, 2003).
**Blackness and Identity Transformation**

We know that race, like other identities, is socially constructed. We must therefore explain how and why people “construct” a morally figured Black identity and how it operates as a symbol of a collectivity or a people. Through the narratives of the Rastafari we shall see why they became Rastafari and how the process of becoming—their identity transformation—works. In becoming Rastafari, my interlocutors engaged in a dialogue with past movements, martyrs, injustices, and racial understandings. Through imagination, reflection, memory, and dialogue with other people, they became living embodiments of the Black past.

The Rastafari, as a collectivity, are less than 80 years old and comprise a small percentage of the Jamaican population. Although the number may be increasing, there are only a few people of the vintage of my narrators who were raised from childhood as Rastafari. Becoming a Rastafarian is characteristically a conversion process, an identity transformation. However, it is not only a religious conversion; it is also a racial one, a transition of Blackness from low to high salience in a person’s self-concept. This process can profitably be grasped through Black identity theories such as William Cross Jr.’s theory of nigrescence (i.e., the process of “becoming” Black). Black identity theories such as nigrescence aim to describe the paths and experiences through which people come to positively value Blackness as a salient identification within their identity repertoire. However, the religiously and morally grounded Blackness of Rastafari identity suggested to me that nigrescence theory should be extended to include the religious and moral dimensions of Black identity formation, which I do in chapter 3.

The narratives of my Rastafari interlocutors suggest that some people do privilege a few salient identifications such as Blackness over others and that these privileged markers frequently inform other dimensions of their identity. Cross has been the most prolific and profound contributor to our understanding of Black identity transformation, framing it as a model of identity metamorphosis in which a person moves from no or minimal engagement of Blackness to concentrated focus on it (Cross Jr., 1995; Cross Jr., & Vandiver, 2001). Sister Ecila, a former Garveyite who was in her late sixties when I first met her at the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Kingston, told me:

> Once we recognize our Black culture and history, we were no longer content with what we had been taught. . . . It was not England first [anymore].
It was Africa and Black first . . . when Garvey done [left to England] I don’t give up on the Black race . . . that is why I am a member of this [Ethiopian Orthodox] Church.

Sister Ecila, after considerable reflection, resolved that her understanding of race and history was inadequate. She believed that so much of what she knew about Blackness and Black people was distorted or negative because of what she had learned in school, in church, and from friends and relatives. It is within this framework that Sister Ecila grappled with changing her worldview, gradually coming to make Blackness and allegiance to Haile Selassie I the cornerstone of her identity. However, there is far more to her story than her privileging Blackness and Rastafari. People like Sister Ecila may have experiences or reach new conclusions about themselves that give rise to their searching for new referents or experiences. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Jamaica, which many Rastafari in Jamaica have joined because of its connection to Emperor Selassie I and Ethiopian culture and history, provides a space for people like Sister Ecila to assert and sustain their morally configured Black identities beyond the experiences that lead to identity transformation.

Black identity theories describe the influence of society and history on Black identities without characterizing those forces as deterministic. Nigrescence theory, though, neglects the role of religiosity in Black identity formation. Religious conversion theories, however, cannot completely fill the gap because they lack an explicit focus on identity, let alone race. Thus, I draw on some of the conversion theories that speak directly to the issues raised by the narratives of my interlocutors. For example, Brother Barody and Ras Brenton were both deeply enthralled by existential questions about God, race, and justice before they began their journey toward Rastafari. Rastafari, in their case, offered answers to their concerns and provided a community of like-minded believers. Through biographical interviewing and field research, and by using narratives and action as proxies for how identities work, we can deepen our perspective on individual and collective identity by socializing and historicizing it. Indeed, Rambo (2003) argues that the study of conversion requires a multidisciplinary and multimethod approach.

The recurrent patterns of experience involved with my narrators becoming Rastafari were worrying existential questions about God, race, and justice, inquisitive people in search of “the truth,” visions and dreams that provoke questioning and self-reflection, and experiential witnessing—having an experience that unsettles one’s worldview.
Identity transformation involves identity and cultural work. Identity work entails the activities involved in creating and managing one's self-concept and its reference points. These activities are simultaneously cultural work because people use symbols and give them meaning, learn from other people, and interpret cultural materials such as texts, sermons, and speeches. Finally, they participate in ritualistic and routine interactions that fuel (but not necessarily nourish) their identities.

The introduction of new ideas does not mean people will engage these ideas if they have no way to connect it to what they know already (Strauss & Quinn, 1997:40). My interlocutors explained that becoming Rastafari involved making connections among various dimensions of their experience: an acute awareness of oppression; a recognition of belonging to a denigrated group; a realization that there exists a long-standing tradition of positive understandings of Blackness; a discovery that one's cultural heritage has been hidden; that White cultural hegemony has distorted one's self-understanding. These are only a few examples of the connections my Rastafari interlocutors made and internalized through the interior and interpersonal dialogues that they engaged in as they reworked their self-concept. These details of personal identity transformation are taken up in chapters 4 and 5.

Life Stories: Pathways to Identity and History

Life stories are an empirical entry point to understanding how racial and religious identities form, are maintained, and how people experience them. I have considered both the “story” and “history” dimensions of my interlocutors’ narratives (and lives), acknowledging the dynamic and contingent aspects of both (Peacock & Holland, 1993). To focus on the story aspect acknowledges the incompleteness, variability, and contingency of any narrative that a person tells about himself. This by no means discounts the veracity or the “history” part, but it recognizes the imperfectness of human memory and the complexities of telling a story. Some of my Rastafari interlocutors, like Ras Sam Brown and Prophetess, could precisely and accurately remember minute details of things that happened decades ago, such as the date, time, and even what a person was wearing. Brother Dee, on the other hand, regularly got dates wildly wrong. Rasta Ivey was very methodical in her talk; she was careful to say what she knew and what she didn’t, and she regularly recalled pertinent details and memories after we had finished a particular conversation. I define the life story
as those memories that a person determines to tell about his or her life in the context of a “guided interview” (Atkinson, 1998:8). Although I ask questions, the narrator chooses what to tell and how. To the extent that the interviewees are honest and their memory adequate, we can expect that their story will involve things salient to their identity, regardless of how many versions one could tell.

Life stories are inescapably retrospective, which poses the challenge of a person coloring their recollection with the hues of the present or elaborating on the past given accumulated experience. Some of my Rastafari interlocutors, for example, took the interview as a moment to examine their own path toward Rastafari. However, this was not an insurmountable impediment to gaining insight into important identity-relevant experiences. Indeed, identity and conversion narratives may tell us as much about the present as the past (Hobson, 1999:6; Robbins, 1988:66; Snow & Machalek, 1984:177).

Revisiting the “Native” Researcher Question

Audience is another important concern in life story interviewing. The “teller” may relate different versions of their life according to with whom they are talking and how they perceive that person. Race, gender, class, and occupation are only a few of the identifications that may influence how a narrator tells a story. Being a Black man and a fellow Rastafari surely influenced the stories told to me. Therefore, my identity is relevant to the stories told me, as well as my interpretation of the stories. However, being Rastafari myself did not mean that I did not have to grapple with the challenges that all field researchers face. For example, William Lewis (1993) and Joseph Owens (1976), both White priests, had to prove their “heart” (their ethics, intentions) to gain the confidence of their Rastafari interviewees. I, too, had to gain the confidence of my interlocutors, and race and identity were notable points of negotiation.

When my interlocutors looked at me, I was almost always certain that they saw a Black man and a Rastafari, even though I came from the United States and spoke with an accent (to their ears). That I hailed from the United States offered me neither advantage nor hindrance; that was at least apparent to me. I had to create relationships and build trust. Perhaps with the exception of Prophetess and Ras Brenton, I had to first gain the confidence of my interlocutress before they agreed to talk about their lives. The Rastafari are known for being wary of researchers and using various
means to expose their motives (Yawney, 1999:162). Coming from a powerful and wealthy nation, or being a scholar and researcher, did not impress my narrators. I had no money to pay interviewees, and no connections to help people travel to the States. That I wanted to collect interviews did require repeated explanation and justification. However, research is no longer an unusual activity for the Rastafari, and neither is having a college degree extraordinary. Rastafari such as Maureen Rowe, E.S.P. McPherson, Imani Tafari-Ama, Douglas Mack, Ikeal Tafari, Dennis Forsythe, Barbara Makeda Black Hannah, Mutabaruka, and many others, are researching and writing about Rastafari from experiential and scholarly standpoints (e.g., Forsythe, 1983; Rowe, 1985, 1998; McPherson, 1996; Tafari-Ama, 1998; Mack, 1999; Tafari, 2001; Hannah, 2006; Mutabaruka, 2006). I did notice, though, that my narrators sometimes used me as proof of the international presence of Rastafari people, and the need for Rastafari people in general to become more active in documenting and representing the Rastafari to the world.

The common concern expressed by all of my Rastafari interlocutors was that I share the stories of elders and of Rastafari. This consent came with responsibilities and expectations. My interlocutors expected me, as a Rastafari, to privilege the needs and concerns of the Rastafari as a whole. I did not feel this was an undesirable imposition. It was an obligation that had to be reconciled with the work that I wanted to carry out.

Two effects that my research had on some of my narrators were that it caused them to recall things that they had all but forgotten, and it led them to connect memories in a way that they had never done. One day while I was driving, Rasta Ivey suddenly became excited, squirming in her seat and clapping her hands. She had remembered an almost forgotten Rastafari chant, taught to her by a Bedwardite. She began singing, while swaying and clapping her hands, sitting in the passenger seat:

Oh Israel stand, the lion appear
He soon begins to rule
The world get fear
great Kingdom fall
At the sound of his voice
Down in Abyssinia
All people of the world going down before him to bow
Great Ras Tafari, King of Kings who come to reign . . .
“Where the tape [recorder]?” Rasta Ivey asked me. I had not brought it with me. She had come to realize how important it was to record information that might forever be lost and wanted it saved for others to hear. Indeed, it was an opportunity we regretfully missed. Rasta Ivey knew one of the founding Rastafari, Robert Hinds, himself a devotee of self-proclaimed Prophet Alexander Bedward, whom we will meet in the next chapter. Brother Woks, once active in the Ethiopian World Federation, saw me on the street one day and said he remembered some things after we had conducted a formal interview that he wanted to add and clarify. These and other elders recognized the importance of their personal experience to, as Rasta Ivey put it, “Get the world to know of Rastafari!”

The “native” researcher question is an enduring concern of anthropologists and social scientists in general. Delmos Jones (1973) was one of the key initiators of the debate; 20 years later writers such as Kirin Narayan (1993) were still working through the arguments set forth by Jones. Jones pointed out that there was value in carrying out research on a group “of which he himself is a member” (1973:449) and contested the view that the ideal position was that of an outsider seeking to learn the ways of “natives.” Indeed, researchers of Rastafari grapple with these issues of positionality—“insider” and “outsider”—and what it means to “representing” the Rastafari (e.g., Yawney, 1994, 1999). There are advantages to both positions. However, for groups who have been represented by people different from them, the “native” position offers the possibility of a different perspective, a different reading of the data: “There is no escape from the idea that outsiders and insiders view social reality from different points of view and that no matter how hard each tries, neither can completely discard his preconceptions . . . ” (1973:455). From my standpoint, the questions of why and how people become Rastafari, and why and how people valorize Blackness, were questions of interest to scholars, Rastafari, and non-Rastafari alike.

To look like a member of a group or to identify with them is, of course, insufficient because it does not mean that members will see it that way. Groups and communities are diverse, and difference will always manifest in some way. Class, education, language, geographical distance, may, for example, create gulfs between people who share an identity. Some have argued, in effect, that the idea of a native researcher is too complex to really render it a valid standpoint (e.g., Narayan, 1993). We must not neglect, though, that sometimes those people who are “studied” like or want to see people like themselves conducting the research.
The idea of the researcher who can plumb the ways of a people because of their “outsider” status, because they must learn their ways and meanings, and then report this with authority by virtue of having lived that life by briefly getting close to it, is crumbling. I found this notion problematic because it implied that “insiders” or “natives” could not do the job because of their proximity—emotional and cultural—to their people. They would be unable to figure out what was important, blinded by their inside knowledge, unable to separate that from what must be learned. Outsiders could have compassion for and attachment to subjects of study, but not insiders or natives. The double standard is obvious. There is no good reason why researchers studying their own communities and people cannot do research of the same caliber as outsiders (Jones, 1994; Carnegie, 1992; Fahim & Helmer, 1982; Gwaltney, 1993). Indeed, in my case I was an outsider because I had to gain entrée into a community; I had to win hearts and did not know what my interlocutors knew. I had to learn, and in effect, they had to teach. I learned a great deal through their sharing their life experiences. I asked Brother Endis what he thought about “foreign” researchers, and he replied by saying that there is a role for them to play: they help to spread the “news” of Rastafari. And this was what I found, in many ways: most of my interlocutors desired for other people to “hear” and learn about Rastafari—they literally wanted me to spread the word. For many Rastafari, even academic works served this purpose. I saw quite a few Rastafari—young and old—with tattered copies of the Report (Smith, Augier, & Nettleford, 1960) or Joseph Owens’ Dread (1976) stuffed in a back pants pocket or rolled up in a hand. There were questions that I almost invariably had to answer, and they were the same as those posed to Barry Chevannes, a Jamaican scholar who has written extensively about Rastafari: “And one of the questions with which I most frequently have to deal with is this: ‘What good will come from your research?’ ‘Exactly how will it benefit me and others like me?’ Often, potential respondents will not co-operate unless this question is satisfactorily answered” (1978:250). Such questions attest to the intelligence of the interlocutors, their concern with how they will be represented, and how the research will be used.

Research and Data

Beginning in early 1998, I spent several months-long stretches living first in Kingston on the edge of the gulley that divided Grants Pen and Drumblair and then in the Rivoli section of Spanish Town. I spent time
visiting the homes and settlements where many of the elder Rastafari live. My travels were limited primarily to the area between Greater Kingston and Spanish Town, with regular visits into rural St. Catherine and St. Thomas parishes. My interlocutors constitute a convenience sample because I met most of them through Rastafari associated with the Rastafari Federation (RF), an umbrella organization of Rastafari groups (only a handful were members of the Federation). The staff and membership offered me access to a network of Rastafari, most of whom would fit a broad definition of what a non-Rastafari would call activists. I met a few of my narrators through my own travels and effort. I would approach older Rastafari, introduce myself, and explain my interest in recording their story of becoming Rastafari. Not all of the Rastafari I approached were interested in participating in the project, but all of them shared with me something about their experience of becoming Rastafari. I spent time with many of those elders who did not “formally” participate, and thus learned much through our dialogue. The primary Rastafari affiliation of most of my narrators is the Nyabinghi Order (one of the major “sects” of Rastafari) or the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, or both. During 1998, I tape-recorded 26 life story interviews of Jamaicans who became Rastafari between 1931 and 1978. Many other Rastafari, as I noted above, shared parts of their becoming Rastafari stories with me, although I did not tape-record these; some were impromptu. Nearly all of my narrators lived in Kingston and the parishes of St. Andrew and St. Catherine, although a few lived in the parishes Clarendon and St. Thomas, and Westmoreland. With a few exceptions, these Rastafari would locally be construed as “elders,” and I refer to them as such. Some of the elders are considered “matriarchs, “patriarchs,” or “ancients,” given their age and longevity as Rastafari. Of the first 26 Rastafari whose stories I taped, five were women (another life story told to me by an elder woman Rastafari had to be recalled from my memory and jotted down hours after we talked).

I used a life story interview strategy that drew on a small number of broad, open-ended questions. The taped interviews lasted between 90 minutes and 3 hours, focused on before-becoming Rastafari memories, race and identity, and when and how each interviewee became aware of Rastafari and moved to adopt the faith. As I saw the pattern of the “encounter” (explained in chapter 3) emerging as a recurring theme in people’s stories of how they became Rastafari, I began to focus more intently on this as a part of the interviewing. I had ongoing conversations and interactions with nearly all of my narrators; these conversations
provided further opportunities to learn more. Since the original inter-
views, I have continued collecting elder life stories, and I extended the
relationships and obligations I had already developed and created new
ones, as well.

Most of my narrators were self-employed as artists, vendors, higglers,
and tradespeople such as cobbler, drum-maker, and wood-worker. A few,
such as Brother Yendis and Empress Dinah, have worked for “Babylon.”
Brother Yendis worked for the sanitation department and Empress Dinah
calls herself a “businesswoman.” Their work, though, did not affect their
commitment to their identity as Rastafari. Perhaps it bolstered it because
they were regularly reminded of their identity by the discrimination and
insults directed at them.

Most of my narrators’ children were adults. Some raised their children
to be Rastafari, but many did not. I could discern no logic in this pattern
other than personal decisions about how to raise and socialize children.
Ras Tee told me that you must let children “choose the path to walk,”
meaning that he believed they must not be forced into the faith: “They
will rebel if you force them. Look ‘pon the Christian them when the par-
ent too strict ‘pon them. Them go wild first chance them get.” Many Ras-
tafari shared his view. Implied in Ras Tee’s view is that if parents set a
good model, their children will become Rastafari. On the other hand,
Ras Chronicle and Sister Sersi believed that children should be raised as
Rastafari. Both had young children, boys and girls, who wore dreadlocks.
“You must raise them right, that mean they must be Rasta from start.
Rasta is discipline and love. Children need that,” said Sister Sersi. How-
ever, as I have implied, the growth in Rastafari has not been the result of
people being born as Rastafari, but becoming Rastafari at some point in
the life course. This suggests that the continued vitality of Rastafari does
not depend only on their raising their children to be Rastafari.

Another important point to address is the patchy presence of gender
in the stories my narrators related to me. Only occasionally did some
of my narrators mention gender in their “becoming” stories. This does
not mean gender is unimportant, or that gender inequities do not ex-
ist. The stories related to me, especially the transformation parts, were
typically self-focused. This was interesting to me given the significance
many Rastafari males ascribe to themselves in relation to women Rasta-
fari, and the general consensus that the Rastafari are a male-dominated
people. For example, some Rastafari argue that a woman can become
Rastafari only through the guidance of a man. However, only one of my elder woman narrators, Sister Coromantee, made this point: “The King man should be in front, the Queen behind him. . . . He must instruct her in the proper ways.” However, her story of her path into Rastafari had no man in it other than Christ. Sister Coromantee said she “crossed over to Rastafari in 1956,” but she dreamed a few years earlier that she went to heaven with Christ and that this dream led her to pay more attention to “God talk” such as that spoken in the street meetings of the Rastafari. Men, especially her partner, occupy other stories that Sister Coromantee told me, but her initial move toward Rastafari was the result of her own effort.

My convenience sample of Rastafari suggests no gender-based difference in how my narrators began their journey toward becoming Rastafari. Both men and women had dreams and visions involving religious and racial symbols, burning curiosity about existential questions, and jarring personal experiences, all of which disturbed their present worldview. My inference is suggestive, but limited by whom I talked to. When I did ask questions about gender, double standards favoring men were sometimes acknowledged, but framed as behavior that was increasingly contested by both men and women Rastafari. Many of the women and men that I interviewed, especially those sympathetic to the aims of the Federation, were among the vanguard of older Rastafari promoting gender equity, recognizing that the Rastafari concern for liberation and justice must not be contradicted by their practicing oppression (we will return to this issue in chapter 6).

Much has changed during the lives of my narrators, most notably the transition of the Rastafari from pariahs to exemplars of Black culture and history. The Rastafari have a global presence, constituting what some call a “traveling culture” (e.g., Homiak, 1999). However, popularity and diffusion have roused new challenges for the Rastafari in Jamaica, in a new terrain for identity formation. The new terrain involves internationalization of Rastafari identity, new technologies, changes in social class, demographics, and attitude among the Rastafari as women, youth, and well-off people participate in shaping the personal and collective representations of Rastafari. All of this is occurring as older Rastafari like my narrators grow infirm and “drop off” (pass on). How or will the Rastafari persist into the twenty-first century? These questions and others are addressed in chapter 6.
“I have been fighting on this battlefield for a long time,” Rasta Ivey said to me. “Which battlefield is that?” I asked. Stretching her eyes and raising her voice, the rail-thin octogenarian replied to me in a very defiant and indignant tone:

The battlefield of righteousness, Black liberation, and Conquering Lion [of Judah] is what I am talking. From we stand up for Black people and say King Rasta come to redeem we, people start to fight against we. But we a people who don’t bow [practice immorality]! I was on a mission for King Rasta. So, I don’t fear police, politician, bad man, no one at all! Because I have the power in me, that is Rastafari.

Nearly all of the Rastafari whose stories inform this book are activists in that they have been consistently involved in promoting and defending their faith and identity. These Rastafari represent a limited—but significant—orientation among the Rastafari, one highly deserving of attention. These aging Rastafari have participated in chapters of the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF), the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Rastafari Movement Association (RMA), and associations of their own making, such as the Brothers Solidarity of United Ethiopia (BSUE). They have petitioned government to promote their agenda; and several of them have served as representatives of Rastafari in Jamaica and abroad. As such, we have a particular perspective shaped by the experience and standpoint of my interlocutors. In the following pages we will gain some sense of the social and personal origins of Rastafari identity as it has developed from its origins and, in doing so, witness how a morally configured conception of Blackness has been incorporated into struggles for freedom, justice, and for a positive Black identity.