FREEDOM IN EXILE: RASTAFARIAN RESPONSES TO CULTURAL DISASSOCIATION

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From the outset the Rastafarian movement, which originated in the 1930s in Jamaica, was concerned with the central question of place. In its advocacy of Africa as the true home of all peoples of African descent and especially for the ex-slave population of the Americas, it tapped into a powerful Jamaican tradition of redemption and repatriation, of liberation from the shackles of "mental slavery" which had bound blacks since the advent of colonial interests in the Americas. It also provided a means by which the culturally disassociated could rediscover an identity and sense of worth, taken from them by the process of enslavement. Since the origins of the Rastafarian movement, however, the conception of both Africa, usually referred to as Ethiopia, and Jamaica has undergone considerable modification, reflecting not only the changing social and economic situation of the Rastas in Jamaica, but the spread of the movement beyond its land of origin, into the Jamaican diaspora in Europe and America, where it has attracted not only Jamaicans and their descendants, but others of African descent (African-Americans, for example). Mainly through the influence of reggae music, an increasing number of white converts, who would seem to have little connection either to Africa or Jamaica, find other needs met by the philosophy, theology and lifestyle of the Rastafarian movement.

As early as 1784, the name Ethiopia had been associated in Jamaica with the concept of salvation, with the formation of the Ethiopian Baptist Church.¹ A denomination of the American Baptist movement, the Ethiopian Baptist Church thought that by using black preachers, they would be able to find more appeal among the largely uneducated poor of Jamaica, an approach that was largely successful.

By the time of the emergence of the Black churches, Africa (as a geographical entity) was just about obliterated from their minds. Their only vision of a homeland was the biblical Ethiopia. It was the vision of a golden past - and the promise that Ethiopia

should once more stretch forth its hands to God - that revitalised the hope of an oppressed people. Ethiopia to the blacks in America was like Zion or Jerusalem to the Jews.²

It was not, however, until the early part of this century, with the work of Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born champion of the self-determination of Africans throughout the world, that the name Ethiopia became a powerful spiritual force in Jamaican religious life. In 1916, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), on the principle "Africa for the Africans at home and abroad",³ idealising Ethiopia as "an inspiration for the liberation of Africans in the West."⁴ He saw the necessity for those of African descent to see God in their own terms, and most importantly in their own image:

We, as Negroes, have found a new ideal. Whilst our God has no colour, yet it is human to see everything through one's own spectacles, and since the white peoples have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only now started out... to see our God through our own spectacles.... We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God - God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, the one God of all ages. That is the God in whom we believe, but we shall worship him through the spectacles of Ethiopia.⁵

Garvey gave evidence, drawing mainly from the Bible, to the past greatness of Ethiopia.⁶ The identification of many of the major figures of the Bible (including Moses, Abraham, David, Solomon, and Jesus) as black, gave an increased sense of self-worth and pride to the ex-slaves of Jamaica and the Americas. This foundation was to be built upon by the Rastas in the following decades.

Further to this, Garvey emphasised the imminent return of Africans from their unwilling diaspora, to build again a great civilisation in Africa such as existed before the actions of Europeans destroyed African culture.⁷ Garvey saw Ethiopia as the primary source of inspiration for the blacks in the Americas. It had a recorded history dating back at least 2000 years; an unbroken lineage of rulers tracing itself to the Biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba;⁸ an ancient tradition of Christianity, which survived despite being surrounded by Islam; and perhaps most significantly, Ethiopia was the only country in Africa to successfully resist colonialism. Thus, due largely to Garvey's vision, Ethiopia took on a symbolic meaning to many

Africans in the Diaspora, similar to that which Jews hold toward Jerusalem, Muslims toward Mecca, or Catholics to Rome. It served as a spiritual focus for identity, and a source of culture, by which a dispossessed people could regain their rightful place in the world. Indeed, many heard of the prophecy attributed to Garvey: "Look to Africa when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near."⁹

Rastafarians believe that this prophecy was fulfilled on November 2nd 1930, with the coronation of His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah.¹⁰ The coronation of Selassie, an African,¹¹ gave blacks a means to see God, a figure with whom they could identify, and also brought closer their dreams of liberation from the oppressive white regime of colonial Jamaica. The establishment of a branch of the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF) in Jamaica in 1938 fuelled these hopes, although various leaders were already preaching the divinity of Selassie, quite independently of one another.¹² The announcement by a representative of the EWF on September 30th 1955, that Selassie was building a merchant navy linking Addis Ababa and American ports of trade, increased the belief of Jamaica's poor and disenfranchised that their repatriation was imminent.¹³ Shortly after this, Selassie announced the granting of 500 acres of fertile land in Ethiopia to Western blacks who, through the EWF, had aided Ethiopia in her struggle against Italian aggression during the Second World War.¹⁴ To the poor Jamaicans attracted to the Rastafarian movement, and no doubt to many other slum-dwelling Jamaicans with little other hope of salvation or social mobility, the prospect of imminent repatriation to Ethiopia, which in myth was a paradisiacal Garden of Eden, was no doubt a powerful and attractive image. Selassie was bringing the hope of repatriation and redemption, a return to Paradise, to those who had previously been downpressed and without a homeland. This was to be brought about largely through faith in His divinity. Africa was Heaven, Jamaica was Hell, and the righteous who believed in Selassie would be redeemed from their downpression and transported to Paradise.

At this time, however, the Rasta faith appears to have been largely a modification of Revival Christianity, replacing the white Jesus of

colonialism with an African Emperor as their ideal of God. It is really not until the 1950s that the Rastafarian movement began to take on a much more forceful and independent role. During the 1950s, there emerged two distinctive strands of Rasta life, each with their own understanding of the place of Africa and Jamaica, and the role whereby redemption/repatriation would take place. The first movement, the Dreadlocks, involved a concretisation of the concept of Babylon¹⁵ and the adoption of a much more confrontational imperative regarding Rastafarian interaction with authority. The second movement, epitomised by the Edwardites, was perhaps a reaction to the first, and also led to rejection of Babylonian society, but found expression in withdrawal from, rather than confrontation with, the oppressor.

It appears that, from early in the decade, the vestiges of colonial worship found in Revivalistic Rastafarianism were rejected by a number of youth, who believed that, as Africa and African ways were the ideal pattern by which life should be lived, all remnants of colonial practices in the fledgling Rasta movement should be dropped.¹⁶ As part of the new conception, the Dreadlocks built upon the foundations of Garvey in their idealisation of Africa as the home of all true civilisation. They developed, in a more radical vision than Garvey had ever conceived, an African identity based on spiritual reality and Biblical knowledge, in direct conflict and confrontation with the values of colonial, Babylonian society. In their adoption of such outward symbols as dreadlocks, Ethiopian colours,¹⁷ ritual use of marijuana, and glorification of their low social status,¹⁸ the Dreadlocks and the Youth Black Faith rejected the values of "decent" society. "With calculated fervour they chose the role of outcasts from society."19 There developed a clear and absolute polarisation between the Rastas and the police, and defiance became the new tool for the development of racial pride, a means of gaining recognition and respect from society, but also of separating themselves from that society. Rastas also began to develop their own unique patois, as a means of claiming the colonial language, English, as their own. This included the use of violent and often indecent expressions

as a part of their everyday discourse, and led to the empowerment of those who did not speak the language with grammatical correctness.²⁰

The violence and confrontation with authority remained largely verbal. Rastas adopted the role of warners and prophets, not agents of retaliation. Retribution for colonial oppression, and repatriation of the Africans in exile, were both left in the hands of Selassie. Thus, Rastas during this period had no interest in political action. Even if they were able to alleviate their physical circumstances by bringing about social reform, they would still not be in Ethiopia; a prison, no matter how well furnished, is still a prison. Repatriation could not take place in purely physical form. To simply move to Africa defeated the divine plan, and negated the redemptive role of Selassie. Repatriation had to occur through divine action, as did the enforcement of justice against the colonial oppressors. Because of this change of the means of redemption, the criterion for salvation also underwent modification; Jah, who is able to determine the upright from the imposters, would repatriate only conscious blacks, and not the brown.²¹

As the Youth Black Faith and the Dreadlocks sought to separate themselves from Babylonian influence, other Rastafarian communities and individuals explored another direction. These Rastas sought to separate themselves from Babylon, and tightly control and regulate the relations between their community and the world outside. To these Rastas, repatriation to Africa was still the goal, but it would be achieved through ritual purity, by separation from evil influences. With the idea that spiritual redemption was nigh, the community of Prince Emmanuel Edwards emerged in the 1950s, with the ideal of being as independent of the Babylonian system as possible: self-sufficiency was thus adopted by the Rastas as a vital part of their livity.22 The task of the Rasta, according to Edwards, was to survive in Babylon, without becoming part of it, until redemption took place "in the fullness of time".23 The rediscovery of "African" religious and social practices became the focus of the group, with heavy emphasis on the maintenance of biblically derived laws concerning spiritual and ritual purity. The rejection of all things "Babylonian" served to further emphasise the separateness and distinctiveness of the exiles, and

assisted the Rastas in this community regain some sense of racial and personal pride, denied them by colonial society.

The dissemination of the message of Rastafari became something of a priority for both of these groups during the late 1950s. The Dreadlocks used a simple method of confrontation with authority to draw attraction to the demands of dispossessed Africans, a stance that also attracted the more politically and socially dissatisfied Jamaicans to the Rastafarian movement. The Edwardites, on the other hand, adopted a more pacifist position, striving to build a sense of identity and unity of belief and purpose among the exiles. With this in mind, and at the auspices of Edwards himself, the first major islandwide grounation of Rasta brethren was held at Ackee Walk in 1958.24 The event was attended by up to three thousand participants, an indication of the popularity and wide following which the movement had attracted up to this time. The grounation, a gathering of Rastas to sing and worship together in peace and harmony, was held to "deal with the question of repatriation, and when this had been announced, many of those people who came in from the country had allegedly done so expecting to depart for Africa."25 Some are said to have sold all of their possessions, including farms and houses, for their departure from the "land of bondage."26 The convention culminated on a march on Victoria Park, where the capture of the city was carried out in symbolic form, with the planting of the Rasta flag. This symbolic victory of Africa over Jamaica, and of Rastafari over Babylon was significant for the eventual social acceptance of the Rastafarian movement.

The idea of immediate physical repatriation obviously held a major attraction, because the Reverend Claudius Henry, another important elder of the period and founder of the African Reform Church, declared that on October 5th 1959, physical redemption would take place. He sold thousands of postcards that were apparently to be used as passports to obtain passage on the ships that would be arriving shortly to carry the exiles back to Africa. The non-fulfilment of this promise eventually led to police action, and the arrest of Henry.²⁷ It also resulted in a study of the Rastafarian movement carried out by the University of the West Indies in 1960, which recommended "a

mission to African countries to arrange for immigration of Jamaicans."²⁸ The study found that the majority of the followers of the Rastafarian lifestyle were poor, often living hand to mouth in the shantytowns surrounding Kingston, and concluded that the possibility of physical repatriation should at least be investigated.

This in turn led to the 1961 Mission to Africa, which was designed to investigate the potential resettlement of willing Jamaicans to Africa. There were even rumours, after Jamaica gained its Independence in 1962, that the English government had given a considerable sum of money to the new Jamaican leadership specifically to bring about the repatriation of African Jamaicans.²⁹ When this money failed to appear, the Rastas added this fraud to their list of grievances against the Babylonian forces in Jamaica. There was also an attempt in the 1970s by the Jamaican authorities to resettle Rastas on government land, but this was rejected because "the receipt of lands from the government was seen as contrary to the interest of the movement. It would have implied sinking roots even deeper into a country that Rastafari are ideologically committed to leave."³⁰

Perhaps because of the failure of both miraculous and physical repatriation, the conception of redemption (and the accompanying identification with place) underwent further changes. Beginning in the early 1970s, the public perceptions of the Rastafarian movement began to undergo a slow transformation. After the violence and confrontation of the foundational years, Jamaican society became friendlier and more accepting of the followers of Rastafari. After Jamaican Independence in 1962, the nation began the slow process of establishing its own cultural identity. Previously, Jamaican society had looked to Europe and the United States for its model,³¹ but the Rastafarian goal of returning the dignity and authority to the dispossessed majority, a population made up of nearly 90% Africans, gave an empowering alternative. The Rasta campaign of Africanisation over the previous four decades, which had resulted in an increased awareness of African identity among the populace at large, combined with the Rastafarian presence in the Arts (especially music), meant that an increasingly large number of middle-class Jamaicans, especially the young, were exposed to

Rastafari in a positive manner. The foundation of groups such as the Twelve Tribes of Israel in 1968,³² later to become an international organisation, brought the middle classes within the fold of Rastafarianism, and began the process of (at least partial) reconciliation with Babylon.³³

With the change in class background within the Rastafarian movement and the general improvement in the economic situation throughout Jamaica, the sting of being taken from Africa and trapped in a prison in the Americas began to decrease. A change in the conception of Jamaica within some segments of the Rastafarian community is noticeable from the 1970s, and stems from several sources. Firstly, the increasing economic comfort of many Jamaicans meant that life as an exile (a "stranger in a strange land") became less of an immediate concern - when one is no longer hungry, without shelter, or otherwise physically oppressed, the prison no longer seems quite such a prison. Secondly, the work of Rastafari to break the shackles of mental slavery, the mindset and outlook that kept the Africans for so long in bondage, seemed to have had a major effect. It now seemed to be recognised that it was not the outward condition that imprisoned the poor, but self-imposed limitations in conception and vision.

A further source of the lessening of discontent with Jamaica came with the emergence of Diaspora Rastafarians. From the 1950s to the 1970s, many Jamaicans (including some Rastafarians) had emigrated, departing mainly for England, the United States, and Canada, and took with them the notions of Babylon and Ethiopia imparted by the early Rastafarian movement. It became apparent to these migrants that the downpression did not end with their migration to wealthier countries. This necessitated a change in the conception of Babylon, which needed to be expanded beyond the post-colonial situation in Jamaica, to include *all* industrialised government, especially that represented by white society, which was then given the role of Babylon previously assigned only to the colonial government of Jamaica. When it was realised that oppression was a universal feature, to be escaped only through the discovery and strengthening of self-identity, the location of the prison ceased to be of such central importance. The conception of Ethiopia remained much the same

within the Diaspora, as an ideal and an image to be gained through right living and correct knowledge of self, but took on interesting additional overtones. To those in the Diaspora, Jamaica itself came to be imbued with some of the mystique of Ethiopia. Compared to England, Jamaica's climate and food were remembered fondly, and the land formerly regarded as a prison became softer and warmer with distance. Children born and raised in the second diaspora thus hankered for Jamaica in much the same way that their forebears had viewed Ethiopia. For many of these, Jamaica itself became Ethiopia, and Jamaican, rather than African, customs and lifestyle were adopted in the search for identity. The use of Jamaican *patois* by English-born Jamaicans is one example of this, or the cooking of Jamaican food.

The process of identification with Jamaican culture and all that this implies had been assisted since the mid-1970s by the development of reggae music.³⁴ Whilst this is not the place to trace its origins,³⁵ it should be noted that reggae was the primary means by which many Rastas came to the movement, both within Jamaica and in the wider world. Chiefly concerned with conveying the themes of Rastafari,³⁶ the popularity of reggae meant the exposure of Rasta symbolism to a worldwide audience unfamiliar with the social and economic background of the movement, with the result that this symbolism underwent some modification. Jamaica, being the spiritual home of the Rastafarian movement, and the birthplace of all of its elders and prophets, seemed to have taken over for non-Jamaican Rastas much of the role Ethiopia played for those born in the Caribbean. Babylon, the white industrialised world, remained Babylon, but Jamaica had for many become Ethiopia, a tropical paradise likened to the Garden of Eden, which Jah sustains.³⁷ Pilgrimage to Jamaica seems essential to non-Jamaican Rastas, if only to join in a grounation or visit the birthplace and grave of Bob Marley, the Rasta prophet and the man primarily responsible for introducing reggae to the world. The latter is often a spiritual journey for foreign Rastas, connecting them to the origins of their own contact with Rastafari.

Through reggae, the message of Rastafari has spread throughout the world, often without reference to or knowledge of the background behind

the movement. The universality of Rastafari has helped in the expansion of the movement into the rest of the Caribbean, where it has also undergone considerable modification. Being divorced from the economic and social downpression found in Jamaica, the movement in Trinidad, for example, developed a much less confrontational stance, emphasising natural living (an *ital* lifestyle) rather than redemption, as the path to liberation. In Africa, where the inhabitants obviously already live in "Ethiopia", the Rasta idea was adopted more as a means of alleviating the suffering experienced under colonial rule, and assisting in the development of identity and selfknowledge (much as in the early Rastafarian movement).

The quest for identity has also been an important factor in the expansion of the movement beyond a quest for African "roots", a meaningless goal for someone who is not of African ancestry. The Rastafarian advocacy of the return of colonised land to its indigenous inhabitants, combined with the anti-colonial stance of early Rasta, have been attractive to the Maori of New Zealand and several Native American enclaves in their struggle to reconstruct after centuries of colonial oppression.³⁸ Perhaps more significantly for the long-term survival and expansion of the movement, the emergence of growing numbers of white Rastas has affected the way in which Rastafari is being understood. Rastas of European ancestry have apparently identified with the teachings of naturalness, ecological awareness, and the oneness of all reality with Jah preached by the Rastas, which may be seen as the idealisation of the "Africa within", the return of a non-hierarchical being who exists in harmony with all creation (as Adam did before the Fall). This extends the concept of redemption beyond the black races: "Jah made us all and we ALL are members of HIS UNIVERSAL FAMILY."39 As the whole world is the creation of Jah, one geographical location is as good (or bad) as another, provided one's mind and heart are open in love. Geography therefore becomes unimportant, when viewed through the correct state of mind. All are in exile, even if living in Africa, unless redeemed through knowledge of self and Jah.

A change in the goal of Rastafarian *livity* has therefore taken place. Different aspects of the teachings have been emphasised according to the time and place in which contact with Rastafari was made. At the time of its conception, Rastafari offered a severely disempowered and downpressed portion of Jamaica's population a hope of redemption, of a return to a mythologised and idealised past, to an Africa of beauty and paradise, untouched by the rape of colonialism. Ethiopia became the ideal, and Jamaica the prison from which salvation was sought. As the economic and physical conditions of the Jamaican poor were elevated, the movement took on a more inward and self-exploratory role, where the discovery of African roots, whether real or imagined, was the emphasis, adding to the broader quest for a Jamaican identity following Independence. The discovery that the influence of Babylon was not restricted to Jamaica further assisted this development, by making the enemy a universal one. With the migration of Jamaicans into the world, Jamaica itself began to take on some of the qualities of Ethiopia, being idealised as a tropical paradise, and so a further change of conception of place occurred. Finally, the emergence of white Rastas prompted a broadening of many ideas already present in embryonic form within the Rastafarian movement since its inception: the equality of all races, the necessity of living in harmony with nature, and the unity of Jah with all creation. A change of consciousness has occurred: the gulf between Ethiopia and Babylon began as a geographical conception, but has become one of the spiritual fundamentals of Rastafari. Geography has become ideology, and a redemption of the spirit must "soon come", if freedom is to be found in exile.

REFERENCES

¹ Gersham A. Nelson, "Rastafarians and Ethiopianism", in Sidney J. Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, Verso, London, 1994, p. 69.

² Leonard E. Barrett, The Rastafarians: The Dreadlocks of Jamaica, Sangster's and Heinemann, London, 1977, p. 75.

³ Nelson, p. 69.

fibid.

⁵ Cited in Barrett, p. 77.

⁶ It is the first significant country mentioned in the Bible (Gen2:13). The fact that Ethiopia also had a long-standing monarchy, a long written history, and a powerful Christian

church, also enhanced this feeling of greatness. See L.A. Eyre, "Biblical Symbolism and the Role of Fantasy Geography among the Rastafarians of Jamaica", *Journal of Geography* 84:4 (1985), pp. 144-148.

⁷ The pyramids of Egypt, for example, were often cited as evidence of this past greatness. ⁸ Nelson, p. 70.

⁹ M.G. Smith, Roy Augier, and Rex Nettleford; Report on the Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica; Institute of Social and Economic Change (ISEC), UWI Kingston, 1960, p. 5. The source of this frequently-quoted prophecy has yet to be found among Garvey's works.

¹⁰ The pre-coronation name of Selassie was Ras ("Prince") Tafari, from which his followers derive their name. For an interesting examination of the derivation of these titles (and their subsequent misuse by Rastafarians), see Clinton Chisholm, "The Rasta-Selassie-Ethiopian Connections," in Nathaniel Samuel Murrel et al, (eds), *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1998, pp. 166-177.

¹¹ Though of Semitic descent, not African, a fact which most Rastas are, it seems, happy to overlook.

¹² Nelson, p. 73. Leaders such as Howell, Hibbert, and Dunkley spent much of the 1930s and 1940s establishing the divinity of Selassie and attracting a following. Some of these early teachers connected the rise of an African king with a call to arms for blacks around the world, and Howell, for example, was arrested repeatedly for attempting to cause riots and political dissention.

^{f3} Ibid., pp. 76-77. The belief was that there would be "seven miles of ships", coming to the Americas to return the Africans to Ethiopia.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁵ Barry Chevannes, Rastafari: Roots and Ideology; Syracuse UP, New York, 1994, p. 162.
¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Red, yellow, green and black.

¹⁸ In this conception, poverty becomes a virtue. To live simply is a sign of humility and connection with nature, a life apparently like that of the Rasta's African ancestors. Technology becomes a tool of artifice and oppression, and leads one away from appreciation of nature and contemplation of Jah.

¹⁹ Chevannes, Rastafari, p. 162.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 166-69. The most striking example of this is the Rastafarian adoption of the personal pronoun "I", which takes on a much broader and deeper theological and political role in Rasta discourse than in "good" English.

²¹ That is, those who are aware of their heritage and true nature, and have knowledge of Selassie.

²² Roughly translated as "lifestyle".

²³ Breiner, p. 33.

²⁴ The gathering was announced as the 'first and last', as repatriation was expected shortly after. See Nelson, p. 77.

²⁵ Chevannes, p. 173.

²⁶ Nelson, p. 77.

²⁷ See Barry Chevannes, "The Repairer of the Breach: Reverend Claudius Henry and Jamaican Society", in Frances Henry (ed), *Ethnicity in the Americas*, Mouton, The Hague, 1976, pp. 263-289.

28 Smith, p.38.

²⁹ George Eaton Smith, "Personal Reflections on Rastafari in West Kingston in the Early 1950s", in Murrell, p. 225.

³⁰ Chevannes, p. 194.

³¹ Frank Jan van Dijk, "The Twelve Tribes of Israel: Rasta and the Middle Class", New West Indian Guide (Nieuwe West-Indische Gids) 62:1-2, (1988), p. 12.

32 Ibid.

³³ Some have argued that the reconciliation of the Twelve Tribes with society has only come at the expense of the adoption of Babylonian ways by the group (hierarchical structure, the

adoption of "churchical" services, payment of dues by members, and reading of the complete Bible). See ibid.

³⁴ Chevannes, p.262.

³⁵ See, for example: Stephen Davis and Peter Simon; Reggae Bloodlines: In Search of the Music and Culture of Jamaica, Anchor Press, NY, 1977; Sebastian Clarke, Jah Music: The Evolution of the Popular Jamaican Song, Heinemann, London, 1980; or Yoshiko S. Nagashima, Rastafarian Music in Contemporary Jamaica, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1984.

³⁶ Ethiopia as the true spiritual home of Africans, the evil nature of Western society (Babylon), the divinity of Selassie, the equality of the races, and the necessity of knowledge to the process of redemption.

³⁷ As one Rasta noted, "Jah-make-ya". Cited in Chevannes, p. 168.

³⁸ See especially Neil J. Savishinsky, "Transnational Popular Culture and the Global Spread of the Jamaican Rastafarian Movement"; New West Indian Guide 68:3-4 (1994), pp. 259-281.

³⁹ Chevannes, p. 274 (emphasis in original).