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Kevin Frank

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“Whether Beast or Human”: The Cultural Legacies of Dread, Locks, and Dystopia

Kevin Frank

ABSTRACT: Analyzing the ongoing problem of Caribbean racial exploitation, particularly fear signified through one of the most potent Caribbean symbols, dreadlocks, I argue that Medusa’s alterity is altered by Rastafarians’ snake-like hair, but the transformative power of Rasta dreadlocks is contested through certain cinematic depictions of dread.

For Whitepeople to feel themselves human they had to make Blackpeople appear to be beasts.
—Earl Lovelace, *Salt*

The Caribbean’s anthropophagous problem is as old as Columbus’s encounter with the region. It is little wonder, then, that the tempest over Disney’s *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* gathered at least a year prior to its 2006 release when, according to *BBC News*, Carib Chief Charles Williams criticized its portrayal of “Dominica’s Carib Indians as cannibals.”¹ But, after seeing the film, it occurred to me that those of us interested in the politics of Caribbean representations have more to be concerned about with its 2003 predecessor *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, which greatly exceeds its sequel in portraying the Caribbean as Other, through an artful stratagem used in earlier Hollywood action films such as *Predator* and *Marked For Death*.² These movies project dread and Otherness through the hairstyle associated with Rastafarians: dreadlocks. In certain cases, dreadlocks coil like snakes around the head; thus,

1. “Film Row Over Pirates ‘Cannibals,’” *BBC News*, (2005) at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/ft/-/1/hi/entertainment/film/4263227.stm>, 26 July 2005.

2. *Pirates Of The Caribbean: The Curse Of The Black Pearl*, dir. Gore Verbinski, Walt Disney Pictures, 2003, DVD.

I argue, they allude to Medusa, the mortal one of the three Gorgon sisters. Among other things, Medusa's story has always been about Otherness, including racial Otherness, an alterity aberrantly altered by the Rastas' donning of snakelike hair. *Predator*, *Marked For Death*, and *Pirates: Black Pearl* appear to challenge this moderation. In them, Dreadlocks and dreadlocks, the men and their corresponding hairstyle, represent a deadly threat to supposedly utopian America or out-of-the-way societies. The twisted outcome of an economy in which so-called third world spaces and people are reterritorialized and reexploited, though virtual, these dreadful Rasta images continue an untenable legacy of Caribbean and racial exploitation.

Three threads knit the fabric of this essay: (1) a Western preoccupation with difference supported by the long-lived Gorgon myth that structures the reception of dreadlocks; (2) an antiracist politics of dreadlocks produced by Dreads/dreads themselves, registered organically by their society and its writers; and (3) the appearances of dreadlocks as signs in American film that depend on the Gorgon tradition and challenge the transformative power of Rastafarianism and dreadlocks. In a certain sense, the difference tied to the Gorgon myth and the counterhegemonic Rasta politics clash in a struggle over the meaning of black appearances, a contest connected to the contradictory need for the Caribbean to function as a sign of both utopia (for tourists and touristic voyeurs) and dystopia (for IMF and World Bank "developers," among others, seeking to impose fiscal discipline on the "unruly" Caribbean). The competing interests in the meaning of dreads raise the question about who really are the modern pirates of the Caribbean. After all, Rastafarianism is arguably the most recognizable export product from Jamaica in particular and the Caribbean in general, so much so that it is a significant reason for the problematic way in which Jamaica functions *as* the Caribbean in the world's imagination. Before I spotlight specific cinematic depictions of dreads, in a speculative enterprise meant to both provoke further study and to establish some cultural context, I will highlight a history of seeing dread(s) in a literary legacy intertwined with locks.

History of a Dread Idea: Death and Otherness

The teeth for their rage were made jagged and their staring fierce, and over the dreaded heads of the Gorgons was great Panic shivering.

—Hesiod, *The Shield of Herakles*

In his study of the Gorgon, Stephen Wilk concludes reasonably that Medusa is really a universal symbol of death, "the putrefying corpse."³ This symbolic role is evident from the oldest written accounts of her, including *The Iliad*, in which Athena appropriates her to help signify

3. Stephen R. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving The Mystery Of The Gorgon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 188.

deathly power, and *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus imagines his own death, which is projected unto Medusa’s face as a cause.⁴ Medusa’s primary meaning is echoed in Dante’s *Inferno*, where she both guards death’s doorway and is an agent of death.⁵ By the late Renaissance, she serves a fairly similar purpose in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as a sentry of the world of the dead, preventing the damned from reaching Lethe, the river of oblivion, and thereby escaping their hellish state.⁶ As important as the fact that Medusa guards the remote, other world of the dead are the beastly characteristics of that world and its entities of which she, a Gorgon, is one: “A universe of death, which God by curse / Created evil, for evil only good, / Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds, / Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things.”⁷ The Gorgon’s deathly import is also salient through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, evident for instance in Charles Dickens’s use to great effect in *A Tale of Two Cities*. In the chapter titled “The Gorgon’s Head,” the repeated references to stone and the allusion to Medusa foreshadow the death of the Monsieur the Marquis:

there was one stone face too many, up at the chateau. The Gorgon had surveyed the building again in the night, and had added the one stone face wanting; the face for which it had waited through about two hundred years. It lay back on the pillow of Monsieur the Marquis.⁸

A twentieth-century example that will suffice is James Merrill’s 1946 poem “Medusa” in which death or decay over time is intimated through reference to the Gorgon: “Snake-laurelled head with overturned eyeballs, / The genius of our summer has become / Its monument, its tomb.”⁹

In addition to death, the Gorgon myth has from its inception been about Otherness. For instance, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Perseus explains to the court of King Cepheus why Medusa was the only Gorgon with snaky hair:

She was very lovely once, the hope of many
An envious suitor, and of all her beauties
Her hair most beautiful—at least I heard so
From one who claimed he had seen her. One day Neptune
Found her and raped her, in Minerva’s temple,
And the goddess turned away, and hid her eyes

4. Homer *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. A. T. Murray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 261 (Book 5. 737–742). See also Homer *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 270 (Book 11. 718–726). For a collection of Medusa’s representations from ancient to modern times see *The Medusa Reader*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Routledge, 2003).

5. Dante Alighieri, *Hell of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Steve Ellis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 55 (Canto 9. 52–57).

6. John Milton, *Paradise Lost of John Milton*, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton, 1993), 49 (Book 2. 604–611).

7. *Ibid.*, 50 (Book 2. 622–625).

8. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 122. See also, 112.

9. James Merrill, “Medusa,” in *From the First Nine Poems, 1946–1976* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1982), 8.

Behind her shield, and, punishing the outrage
 As it deserved, she changed her hair to serpents,
 And even now, to frighten evil doers,
 She carries on her breastplate metal vipers
 To serve as awful warning of her vengeance.¹⁰

On the one hand, “the outrage” to Minerva may be that the rape occurs in the temple, thereby defiling its utopian order. On the other hand, Minerva’s retribution against Medusa suggests more that she feels insulted and acts out in resentment. What is clear from the account of Perseus is that Medusa’s beauty does contribute to her rape and is therefore part of the evil. Also, Medusa is transformed into an Other by her punishment, an evildoer appropriated as a warning to others. Her once beautiful hair, now converted to serpentine locks, symbolizes the dread she represents.

There is more to this, however, for Medusa’s “evil” transcends the conceptual border and reaches into actual geographic territories, with specific racial and gender implications: “As he [Perseus] flew over / The Libyan sands, drops from the Gorgon’s head / Fell bloody on the ground, and earth received them / Turning them into vipers. For this reason / Libya, today, is full of deadly serpents.”¹¹ These verses construct representationally the foreign, racial Other, and Medusa is reified through this African association. Here, the stereotype of Libya—“full of deadly serpents”—is easily transposable to Libyans: Libyans are deadly serpents.¹² The version of the Gorgon myth from Greek writer Palaephatus connotes greed and colonial ambition as possible motives for such demonization, indeed for the myth itself:

Phorcys was a Cernaeon—by race these are Ethiopians who live on the island of Cerne outside the pillars of Heracles. The fields they till are Libyan by the River Annon, straight across from Carthage; and a gold-rich people they are. Now Phorcys . . . made a golden statue of Athene which was six feet tall. The Cernaeans, it should be noted, call Athene “Gorgon.” . . . Now Perseus, an exile from Argos, was making piratical raids with ships and troops along the sea coast. When he found out that there was a kingdom there in the hands of women—which was also rich in gold and had only a few men—he approached.¹³

10. Ovid *Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 106 (Book 4, 794–803). We do not delve much into the convoluted gender politics of Medusa’s apparent crime (exceptional beauty) and punishment (rape and transformation to snake-haired ugliness) here. But, her double victimization resonates in how many rape victims are still treated: she suffers both the rape and punishment for it, which implies she is held at least partly responsible. Of course, the story Medusa appears in is really about the heroism of Perseus.
11. *Ibid.*, 101 (Book 4, 618–622).
12. A corollary of this ancient signification is Libya’s terrorist history which, despite its government’s late admission of partial responsibility in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103, the corresponding restitution to victims’ families, and its apparent disclosures and abandonment of nuclear weapons ambitions, suggests it will remain anathema, a perennial “evil doer,” especially to George W. Bush’s administration.
13. Palaephatus *On Unbelievable Tales of Palaephatus*, trans. Jacob Stern (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 1996), 62. Phorcys is reputedly the father of both the Gray and the Gorgon sisters. Stern correctly points out that in this rendering the Gray sisters and the Gorgon sisters are conflated, but that is not the point.

The key points are the Gorgon’s African ties and the loot motivation. Andromeda is the parallel booty in *Metamorphoses*. After slaying Medusa, Perseus stops in Ethiopia where the princess is chained to a rocky ledge, a sacrifice to a sea serpent. He falls immediately in love with her, waits beside her, and when the serpent comes for its prey he cuts off its head, after which he receives Andromeda’s hand in marriage as a reward. He is also promised a kingdom as her dowry.¹⁴

The less obvious motive of Perseus, conquering matriarchal kingdoms or accounting for that conquer, is also one of the ways in which Medusa is linked to Africa, specifically to African societies ruled by women. Diodorus’s collection of other historians’ work, *The Historical Library*, also places the Gorgons in Africa: “In Africa there was not one race only of women who were famous for valour and warlike exploits: for we are informed that the Gorgons (against whom Perseus made war) for courage and valour were eminent.”¹⁵ The Amazons are the other race of women: “In the western parts of Africa, upon the borders of those tracts that are inhabitable, there were anciently a nation under the government of women, whose manners and course of living were altogether different from ours.”¹⁶ The differences delineated—women managing all warfare, public offices and such—indicate an entrenched matriarchal order, but of greater import is the emphasis on how “*altogether different*” their way of life is, their Otherness. Diodorus’s conclusion regarding the warfare between the Amazons and Gorgons evokes a subjugating Occidental attitude towards feminine, Afrocentric power:

The Gorgons, notwithstanding, were afterwards of great power, till the reign of Medusa, at which time they were conquered by Perseus. At length both they and the Amazons were utterly extirpated by Hercules, at the time when he travelled into the western parts, and erected the pillar in Africa. For it was a thing intolerable to him, who made it his business to be renowned all the world over, to suffer any nation to be governed any longer by women.¹⁷

Determining the exact nature of migrations and transcultural exchanges between ancient Greece and Africa, of Medusa’s movements as a symbol between and within the two worlds, or of travels of this and other symbols from the ancient to the modern world is beyond our focus. However, ancient history and literature from Herodotus and Homer, among others, indicate there was contact between Greeks and Africans. In *Blacks in Antiquity* Frank Snowden argues, “It is clear that he [Herodotus] was writing primarily about African Ethiopians, the most woolly-haired of all men.”¹⁸ In *The Odyssey*, for example, we find, “But now / Poseidon had gone to visit the Ethiopians worlds away, / Ethiopians off at the farthest limits of

14. Ovid *Metamorphoses*, 102–104 (Book 4. 667–705).

15. See *The Medusa Reader*, 26.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 29. See also 28 regarding warfare between the two groups.

18. Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 105.

mankind, / a people split in two, one part where the Sungod sets / and part where the Sungod rises.”¹⁹ The tenor of the Ethiopians being “worlds away” at the “farthest limits of mankind” underscores a racial geography that makes black people outlandish. Read another way, “limits of mankind” suggest where the boundaries or restraints of the human race are drawn and tested. Also, connected to our discussion above of Perseus’s rewarded adventurism, speaking of his own riches, Menelaus declares: “Believe me, / much I suffered, many a mile I roved to haul / such treasures home in my ships. Eight years out, / wandering off as far as Cyprus, Phoenicia, even Egypt, / I reached the Ethiopians, Sidonians, Erembians—Libya too.”²⁰ The more obvious colonial trope here is exploration, and these texts indicate the opportunity for exchanges of narratives and symbols. But to focus on the migrations of the Medusa symbol is to lose sight of the bigger picture of *how* and *what* Medusa actually signifies in a particular context or across contexts.

Stephen Wilk points out that “striking parallels to the Greek Gorgon can be found in mythologies around the world,” and he adds something quite relevant to our purpose: “At best, the Gorgon and its parallels seem to be mixtures, to varying degrees, of beast and human.”²¹ What is important is the Greek preoccupation with places such as Ethiopia and Libya, essentially, the significance of Africa to their history and classical myths. Again, various renderings of those myths having to do with Medusa suggest that, among other things, her story has from its origins been about racial difference. Given the convergence of both oral and written histories and cultures that went into creating the modern Americas, it is not so surprising that by the twentieth century the syncretism of myth and reality created the foundations for the birth of a Rasta nation, simultaneously idealistic in vision and practical in agency. On this note, Medusa’s transformation is also significant because blacks who don hair like snakes, in a self-declarative act, perform a reverse transformation by reclaiming matted hair that has been perceived as aesthetically loathsome. As anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere reasons, “there are no snake hairs in nature, so it’s possible that Medusa’s snakes are only matted locks.”²²

19. Homer *The Odyssey*, 78 (Book 1. 25–28).

20. *Ibid.*, 127 (Book 4. 90–94).

21. Wilk, *Medusa*, 55, 94.

22. See *The Medusa Reader*, 169.

Locks: a History of Rastafarian Dreads/ (Re)Birth of a Terrible Beauty

Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight with a new Gorgon.
—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Rastafarians are dumbfounding in their reclamation of African heritage and humanity as the platform for a transformative exodus in which Africans are among Yahweh’s (*Jahweh’s*) chosen people. Transposing themselves from vilification to veneration, they simultaneously claim an identity they were taught to despise and an inheritance marking them as exceptional, if not superior. The brutality of slavery required that the European portray Africans as brutes. Efforts by slave descendants to transform themselves involve wrestling with that construction, an agenda manifest in the Caribbean linguistic and literary heritage, the project of reconfiguring the Caribbean self through discursive enterprises. Confronting the European “gift of language” is at the cornerstone of Caribbean cultural expressions.²³ This is palpable in its literary tradition rooted in Caliban, the “deformed slave” from William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* who both enables, through his labor, and disturbs, through his unruliness, Prospero’s utopia.²⁴ Caribbean attempts at reconfiguring the self rebut the dreadful European image of them as inhuman or other.

Caribbean endeavors at transfiguration through liminal praxis, marginal and marginalized forms constituting the initial or transitional stage of a process, are equally important. Dreadlocks, the hairstyle and the persons, are prime examples, signifying an intriguing alteration of the Medusa image and the dreadful image of African descendants, such as that held by Prospero of Caliban. However, that alteration results ironically in an aberrant alterity, a deviation from the right path of altering the state of being Other and a reification of that state, making abstract Otherness material or concrete. This signification involves the synthesis of aesthetics and politics and fulfills both romantic and utilitarian aspirations. That is, dreadlocks suggest something of the romantic notion of true beauty containing aspects of the terrible (terrible beauty). But they also suggest the utility of this romantic vision in the idealized (re)fashioning of a Caribbean self, offering a revolutionary potential some people fear as much as that of late eighteenth-century France. This (re)fashioning, this terrible beauty, was arguably first (re)born among Rastafarians.

23. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), 15.

24. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest of William Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Holland (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1999). The name Caliban, of course, alludes anagrammatically to cannibal. This primary portrayal of the cannibal or Caribbean is the template against which Caribbean counterrepresentations are drawn.

Given that the hair of Rastafarians, like Medusa's, suggests a mass of twisting snakes, Perseus's stop in Ethiopia is intriguing for another reason. Rastafarians find their lost homeland, indeed, their promised land, in Ethiopia and their salvation in the figure of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, Ras Tafari, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah. To many Rastas, dreadlocks symbolize their Davidic heritage and marks their adherence to Holy Scripture, in particular, Leviticus 21:5: "They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corner of their beard, nor make any cuttings in the flesh."²⁵ Dreadlocks also signify their crown, their identification with the African lion's mane, their own kingliness (and queenliness), which is consistent with one of Wilk's explanations of the Gorgon's form, "modeled after the lion. . . . Such an identification immediately accounts for the fangs and the curly locks with beard, which is simply the lion's mane."²⁶ For Rastas, the symbolic identification is a romantic vision that casts aside colonial subjectivity to a European king (or queen). By romantic here I mean something similar to Northrop Frye's suggestion that romanticism is "akin to *romance*, with its effort to maintain a self-consistent idealized world without the intrusions of realism or irony."²⁷

When Kent Patterson declared in his essay "A Terrible Beauty" that "as a serious aesthetic symbol, it [the Medusa] seems to have become outdated," he obviously had not considered Rastafarians and dreadlocks.²⁸ He had not looked beyond traditional academic and artistic sources: writing and painting, books and museums. Other forms of poetic articulation such as the body and hair suggest a terrible beauty alluding to Medusa was indeed reborn among Rastafarians, and as a symbol the dreadlocks hairstyle is both aesthetically and politically potent. In this interpretation of dreadlocks I am guided somewhat by Kamau Brathwaite's notion of "total expression," one of the features of "Nation Language," which is oral and physical. Brathwaite argues that it occurs because people "come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very *breath* rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums."²⁹ Edouard Glissant makes a related point, albeit somewhat differently: "It is nothing new to declare that for us [people of African descent] music, gesture, dance are forms of communication, just as important as the gift of speech."³⁰ In (hair)style and gesture, dreadlocks do communicate, clearly sometimes, ambiguously at others.

25. *Holy Bible* (Stamford: Longmeadow Press, 1984).

26. Wilk, *Medusa*, 94.

27. Northrop Frye, ed., *Romanticism Reconsidered: Selected Papers From the English Institute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 11.

28. Kent Patterson, "A Terrible Beauty: Medusa in Three Victorian Poets," *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 17 (1972): 119.

29. Kamau Brathwaite, *History Of The Voice* (London: New Beacon Press, 1984), 19.

30. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse of Edouard Glissant*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 248.

The fears Rastas continue to generate are also prefigured by the dread in the European imagination occasioned by the African presence in Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean. A good example from Victorian literature is in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, in a passage often quoted in interpretations of Jane and her “dark double”; but these readings, including Susan L. Meyer’s insightful view of Bertha as Caribbean Creole or black, miss a crucial point.³¹ Bertha’s representation as a subhuman monster also has to do with her hair. One of the ways her “white” Creole status is made suspect is because her hair has in effect “turned back” or, better, “black” to Africa:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, *whether beast or human* being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and *a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane*, hid its head and face. (emphases added)³²

Jane further colors the figure she calls a “clothed hyena,” another way of linking Bertha to Africa: “The maniac bellowed: she parted *her shaggy locks* from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors” (emphasis added).³³ At this moment hair helps draw the line between civilized and uncivilized and suggests the threat of aliens who appear to have African blood or, if you will forgive the obvious pun, African roots.

In Orlando Patterson’s *The Children of Sisyphus* dehumanization is also linked to Afro-Jamaica, specifically, to the Jamaican Dungle (the merger of urban jungle and waste dump). Dreadlocks Rastas are in many ways representative of the Dungle, the sort of place one of the main characters, Dinah, is ashamed of. This shame is indicated in an exchange with Mabel, who asks her, “Yu mean to say dat yu don’ wan’ de people dem fe know whe’ yu come from. Yu hidin’ it?”³⁴ Dinah replies: “Yes, ah hidin’ it; ah wan’ people to t’ink me is human an’ not beast.” (78)

In Barry Chevannes’s *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, a humorous anecdote speaks volumes of the dread that dreadlocks can communicate: “A lady turned a sharp street corner in downtown Kingston only to find a Dreadlocks doing the same but going in the opposite direction. In her fright she exclaimed: ‘Jesus!’ Calmly penetrating her with his red, dilated eyes, he said: ‘Shh! Tell no one thou hast seen I!’”³⁵ This story is strikingly similar to a

31. See Susan Meyer, “Colonialism And The Figurative Strategy Of *Jane Eyre*,” *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 247–270. For the “dark double” parallel, see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

32. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 250.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 78. Subsequent references to this work appear parenthetically in the text.

35. Barry Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 101.

passage in *The Children of Sisyphus* about the Rastas' encounters with Babylon (the oppressors and their middle-class lackeys), suggesting the organic, widespread nature of such lore:

Then there was the time when Brother Alawecious was walking down King Street. He had just reached the intersection of King Street and Barry Street when a fat, red woman, all smothered over with packages, butted into him. Brother Alawecious held his peace and stared down at her. She moved away the parcel that blocked her vision and glanced up at Brother Alawecious. As soon as the seething fool realized he was one of the sons of Ras she flung away all her packages and screamed, 'My God!'

Upon which Brother Alawecious folded his arms with a calm dignity, drew himself up, and with divine condescension uttered down at the gaping, open-mouthed bourgeois:

'So, you recognize I.' (190)

These similar narratives signal what I referred to earlier as an aberrant alterity in the Rasta's paradoxical and simultaneous cementing, shattering, and recasting of his Otherness by proclaiming and disarming the woman's timorous response to his dreadful visage. The dread politics of the Rasta's response in either version of this allegory, his visionary apotheosis of himself as Jesus, is both humorous and serious.

Rastafarian dreadlocks are believed to have two separate or confluent sources, East Indian and East African, and a division between sacred and profane impulses knots the debate over their origins. The attempt by Chevannes to justify his position that Rastafarian dreadlocks originated with the Youth Black Faith group, by taking to task Ajai Mansingh and Laxmi Mansingh, is indicative:

Mansingh and Mansingh (1985) do not venture to say why, if as they claim there were locksmen from as early as the late 1930s, it took over two decades for dreadlocks to become popular, or why the practice was adopted from Hindu workers. The question is highly relevant because while among the Hindus matted locks were a sign of a holy man, among the African-Jamaicans it was a sign of the insane and derelict. While it is true that both prophet and derelict have one thing in common, namely their marginality from society, it is by no means insignificant that the holy man is a revered intercessionary, whereas the derelict is a despised vagrant outside society altogether.³⁶

Here Chevannes presents the sources and the Rastafarians' motives for imitating them as either holy or secular without considering that the two agendas could coexist, a bipolar view consistent with how the community sees Rastas in Roger Mais's *Brother Man*: "Brother Man belonged to that cult known as the Ras Tafarites, and some people said he was mad. Others again thought he was a holy man and a healer."³⁷ Chevannes seems at pains to distinguish his position from Horace Campbell's. Hence, speaking of Campbell's Mau-Mau (Kenyan, East African) theory of origins, Chevannes declares: "While we concur that dreadlocks was a

36. Chevannes, *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, 94.

37. Roger Mais, *Brother Man* (Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2004), 26.

phenomenon of the 1950s, not prior, he nevertheless maintains that it was adopted in keeping with the warrior image of the Mau-Mau, whereas I have argued that it was adopted in keeping with the lunatic image of the outcast.”³⁸ As holy men, warriors, or mad men, Rastas were more often than not seen as Others. They were not to be gazed upon for fear, one imagines, that their faces would turn one not to stone but back to the maligned and repressed African past. In the parable above, the Rasta may be seen as a warrior who reclaims the image the symbolic “fat, red woman” has of him as an uncouth madman and projects himself as the holiest of the holy.

Elsewhere, Chevannes makes the case for the term “dread” describing the burgeoning Rastafarians, even before they began locking their hair: “As resistance to the backward traditions [those associated with obeah and other beliefs] of organizations led by the elders stiffened, and the younger members purged their own organizations of Revivalist traits, the title ‘Warrior’ or ‘Dreadful’ was conferred on those who distinguished themselves with ascetic discipline.”³⁹ This marks the spiritual or sacred enunciation of the Dreads, where the term is synonymous with living in an upright manner, in accordance with religious doctrine. Chevannes identifies the decision not to comb their hair as “a social one at first because society simply did not accept unkempt hair. Not to comb one’s hair was *to declare oneself* not merely antisocial but extra-social, like mad derelicts and outcasts” (emphasis added).⁴⁰ As a socially rebellious act, this self-declaration suggests the Dreads’ profane articulation. The two motives easily combine in that, as Wato, a key informant, sees it, as the hair grew, the spiritual Dreads became all the more fearful politically. Again, part of my argument is that this notion—wooly, shaggy locks signifying fearful Otherness—coincides with Medusa’s meaning and is integral to the scheme of *Predator*, *Marked For Death*, and *Pirates: Black Pearl*.

Dystopia: The Look of One Image Clashing

Yet it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone.
—Percy Bysshe Shelly,
“On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery”

In *Predator*, Dutch (Arnold Schwarzenegger) leads a crew of commandos on what they believe is a search and rescue mission “on the wrong side of the border,” apparently in a Central American jungle. However, they soon find they are after something entirely Other: “an

38. Chevannes, *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, 94.

39. Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 156.

40. *Ibid.*, 158.

enemy *unimaginably more deadly* than any on Earth—because *the Predator is not of this Earth*” (emphases added).⁴¹ Part humanoid, part anthropoid, part mechanical, the predator alludes to a headhunting cannibal. Described as the “jungle that comes alive” and “the demon who makes trophies of man,” it skins its prey and collects their skulls. The predator’s scariness is reinforced through subtle racial manipulation of its humanoid features: its blackness is really marked in its dreadlocks. On the DVD’s Special Features, creature designer Stan Winston comments that it is conceived of as a “Rastafarian warrior.”

As a Caliban figure the predator’s highly technological arsenal does not quite fit with its atavistic jungle lifestyle and demeanor, but it has great mimicry skills. For example, it imitates Dutch’s query of it, “What the hell are you?,” a question reminiscent of Jane’s concerning Bertha: “What was it? Beast or human?” This reminds us too of the “dark double” parallel suggested by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and of Caliban’s mimicry of Prospero. The film’s final showdown is literally a face-off in which the predator unmask and demonstrates further its bestiality as its mandibles induce Dutch to decry, “You’re one ugly motherfucker.” The predator’s meaning combines the fear of racial Otherness and the United States’ deep interest and involvement in the 1980s Central American guerilla wars with terrorist tactics. Its tactics are guerilla-like (the “jungle that comes alive”): it kills itself in its final attempt to kill Dutch. The border the officials are on the wrong side of could easily be Nicaragua’s or El Salvador’s.⁴²

In *Marked For Death* Steven Seagal plays John Hatcher, whose main adversary is “an evil Jamaican drug lord named Screwface, who uses violence and voodoo to ply his trade.”⁴³ The audience’s fear is heightened because Screwface and his dreadlocks posse violate a utopian, small town, slice of Americana. Proverbial suburban white houses, picket fences, and pristinely manicured lawns mark this ideal territory; the Dreads corrupt presumably innocent high school football players and cheerleaders with drugs. This film’s strategy alludes to Medusa’s

41. *Predator*, dir. John McTiernan, Twentieth Century Fox, 1987, DVD (Wide Screen Collector’s Edition). See promotional description on the DVD’s back cover.

42. US funding of anti-Sandinista (Contra) guerillas through arms sold to Iran during President Reagan’s administration has been general knowledge since the surreal Iran-Contra drama was performed in 1986, starring Oliver North and John Poindexter, among others.

43. *Marked For Death*, dir. Dwight H. Little, Twentieth-Century Fox, 1990, DVD. See the promotional materials on the DVD’s back cover. There’s an intriguing link between this film’s site of dread, Jamaican drug posses, and the Contras in that the CIA and other US government agencies may have allowed money for the Contras to be raised from crack cocaine sales in US black neighborhoods. See Gary Webb, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998). Webb supposedly committed “suicide” in December 2004, by shooting himself twice in the face. Jamaican posses played a role in the rise of the crack epidemic. See Laurie Gunst, *Born Fi’ Dead: A Journey Through the Jamaican Posse Underworld* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995). According to Gunst, by the 1980s, Jamaicans “were leaving their ghetto hell for the cities of the United States, transforming their island gang alliances into mainland drug posses” (xiv). Interestingly, in *Predator 2*, the setting is America’s urban jungles infested with gang warfare and drugs.

story in various ways. In addition to guns and voodoo, Screwface has a secret weapon: two heads and four eyes, wherein his “real” magic lies. In both his showdowns with the dreadful “monster,” Hatcher blinds him, in the first case with sand and in the second case by poking his eyes out with his fingers. After Hatcher finally triumphs he strikes a pose with Screwface’s head similar to Benvenuto Cellini’s “Perseus” sculpture at the Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence; his comment, “hope they’re not triplets,” seals the reference to the three Gorgons.

By directly linking Dreads to Medusa, the film reimages Jamaica, normally seen as paradisiacal in tourist advertisements, as a place birthing dreadful, dehumanized lives, capable of terrorizing America. The film also suggests an Afro-Caribbean emasculation that is not too subtle. On the one hand, by linking the antagonists to the female icon of dread, Medusa, it appears to exchange the potency of the male lion, dread association for the female, snake one. On the other hand, the shift of the signifier from lion to serpent inadvertently reinscribes the transformative potential of the dread symbol by situating it within the perpetual realm of protomyth. As Joseph Campbell tells us, the serpent is a universal “symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing to live.”⁴⁴ He adds:

The serpent represents immortal energy and consciousness engaged in the field of time, constantly throwing off death and being born again. There is something tremendously terrifying about life when you look at it in that way. And so the serpent carries in itself the sense of both the fascination and the terror of life.⁴⁵

Like *Predator*, *Marked For Death* contests the Rastas’ aesthetic and political declaration mentioned earlier. If the Rastafarians’ crowning symbol, dreadlocks, has a potentially transformative value, then these films suggest a tempering of that converting potential. Both films appeared following the period of hysteria (which the Seagal movie is clearly tapping into) reacting to the threat of Jamaican posses, around the time of the popular rebirth of Afrocentricity and the brief rise of consciousness in so-called “alternative” hip hop, a period when dreads became popular as a sign of racial affirmation among “developed” Negroes.⁴⁶ Such filmic representations of dreads appear to respond dialectically to these meanings of “dread,” attempting to discipline the racial sign.

While these films seek to control the symbolic potential dreads offer black people by enacting the violent removal of evil Dreads, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse Of The Black*

44. Joseph Campbell, *The Power Of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 45.

45. *Ibid.*

46. I am grateful to my friend and colleague Anthony Foy for this and other cogent comments which helped this essay’s development. Regarding posse hysteria, see note 43, especially Gunst. Regarding Afrocentric, conscious hip-hop, the Native Tongue collective (De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest and others) comes to mind. The movement climaxed in the early 1990s, perhaps best exemplified by Arrested Development’s *3 Years, 5 Months & 2 Days in the Life of . . .* (Chrysalis, 1992). Their song “Dawn of the Dreads” is particularly relevant.

Pearl does so by also giving dreads a white face. One of the utopian dimensions of the film is that it represents a Caribbean in which a black majority does not exist.⁴⁷ Given this idealized state, it seems the film's creators were faced with a dilemma in adapting the Disney ride, "Pirates of the Caribbean": how to make really scary pirates who, also because of the whitewashed Disney ride and older Hollywood renditions of such types, have been reduced to mere caricatures in contemporary imaginations? In other words, within the simulacra of ideal perfection that Disney World presents, historical pirates are rendered harmless. The challenge, then, was to fulfill the vision of megaproducer, Jerry Bruckheimer, who describes on the DVD extras, "Pirates need to be very authentic and have the fear and the loathing that you want to have, and yet you're gonna have a lot of humor with that."⁴⁸

The solution is the clever strategy of invoking a highly potent Caribbean symbol at once recognizable but clouded in mystery (or smoke) the world over: dreadlocks. Compliments of the Jamaican Tourist Board and its related partners, a dominant depiction in the United States is of Jamaicans with and without dreadlocks as fun-loving, peace-loving ("One Love") accommodators of any tourist's desire ("No problem mon").⁴⁹ But there is the other, dangerous Jamaica, outside the confines of the tourist zones that remains mostly unseen by outsiders. Indeed, if that face of Jamaica, if that "Medusa" were really shown or seen, it would turn tourists to stone and send them fleeing back to where they came from with their coveted currency in tow. As the urgency of some reggae and dancehall-reggae music continues to suggest, it is out of these zones that many Rastafarians and Dreads come, and what remains unknown, a mystery, is, of course, an easy source of fear.⁵⁰

47. Governor Swann's house servants are all white, and one wonders at the connotation in the appearance, in terms of percent of population, of more blacks among the Black Pearl's crew of marauders than on the island. In the eighteenth century Caribbean there were surely a higher proportion of black people, *slaves*, than we find in the film. But chattel slaves would be too un-Disney and, in any case, given the lack of any specificity, Disney's Caribbean is clearly and self-consciously *imaginary*.

48. *Pirates Of The Caribbean: The Curse Of The Black Pearl*, DVD.

49. In *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of The Black Pearl*, when Barbosa strands Jack Sparrow on a deserted island for a second time, Sparrow explains to Elizabeth Swann that his "miraculous" escape was really the good fortune of having been rescued by striking a deal with rumrunners who hid their cache there. "You spent three days lying on a beach, drinking rum?" she says, and he jokingly replies, "Welcome to the Caribbean, love," an anachronistic reference to modern-day tourism ("Rum and Sun—Welcome to the Caribbean!") that depends somewhat for its punch on the audience's touristy relationship to the Caribbean.

50. The Medusa analogy for dreadlocks is grounded in other aspects of Jamaican popular culture which are also frowned upon and dreaded by the converted and bourgeois classes. There are many references to the Gorgons in dancehall-reggae music, the drum machine, sample-based offshoot (some might say sample-debased, bastard child) of traditional, one-drop reggae. Perhaps the most illustrative is the example of Ninjaman, who wears the title "Don Gorgon," a reference to both the ancient Medusa myth and Mafia culture (by way of American media, whether periodicals, television, or film). Any who saw the film *Third World Cop* (1999) will be familiar with Ninjaman. Otherwise, those familiar with hip-hop, with Method Man's "Bring The Pain" (Def Jam, 1994; *Tical*, Universal/Def Jam, 2000) in particular, are also familiar with Ninja, perhaps unwittingly. On his hit song "Bring the Pain," Method Man pays homage, if you will, by alluding directly to Ninjaman, particularly, his song "Test the High

To increase its authenticity, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of The Black Pearl* was shot in the Caribbean. But in terms of pirating fear, the film’s “authenticity” also results from appropriating dreadlocks. “The way you get an audience to really embrace a movie,” claims Bruckheimer, “is go against the grain.” However, in costuming and making up Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp), particularly in hair, the film does not so much go against the grain. It feeds on one that movie-going audiences have been devouring for some time: the fear of what dreadlocks may really represent. In the interest of keeping the balance among fear, loathing, and humor, dreadlocks are literally given white faces. Sparrow and other European pirates are given weaves of dreadlocks extensions marking them automatically as deviants at best, demonic at worst. Of course, in the service of Disney’s ideals, part of the symbolic whitening of the dread image, the would-be hero Sparrow is more of a “safe” Dread, a lovable, cuddly rake with a touch of the Other. With red, gold, and green among the colors of beads on one of his locks, Sparrow’s hair alludes to Rastafarianism and to touristic voyeurism.⁵¹ Sparrow is also redeemable because he is motivated by revenge for unjust treatment; he does at times appear to subordinate his own interests to those of the young, would-be romantic hero and heroine, Will (Orlando Bloom) and Elizabeth (Keira Knightley).

On the whole, however, dressing the pirates in dreads is a significant way of suggesting the dehumanized and fearful lives they lead as cursed souls. And unlike on the island where they are fairly absent, blacks and black references are quite conspicuous among the pirates. One of the most prominent black characters does not have dreadlocks, but is dreadful looking nonetheless. Bo’sun (perhaps a pun on buxom) is a bald, brutish, Mandingo-looking Negro with scarification on his face and body. When the pirates first show up to wreak havoc on Port Royal, among the first to disembark are two pirates with dreadlocks, one white and the other black. They are followed by a pirate who firebombs buildings. He wears a red cap and may actually be bald, but his beard is in dreadlocks and seemingly smoking. As he pursues a helpless woman, he is killed by Will; but, of course, belonging to the *Black Pearl*, he doesn’t really die but returns to the deadly action soon enough. In another scene, a dreadlocks pirate confirms for the imprisoned Sparrow that there is a curse when he chokes him with a fleshless hand and declares, “You know nothing of hell.” The film really plays up the racial sign of the dread and undead, spectral pirates in the scene leading up to the climactic battle sequence.

Power” (*Strictly The Best 3*, VP, 1991). In this song Ninjaman refers to himself as the Don Gorgon, a reference he also makes on his album, *De Man Good, The Official Ninjaman* (Act III, 1991).

51. Symbolic Rasta colors are red, gold (yellow), black and green. With origins in Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, red symbolizes the martyrs’ blood, green the African landscape, gold the (stolen) wealth of Africa, and black the complexion of Africans. In terms of voyeurism, the beads also remind the audience of one of the ways of “going native” while on holiday, getting their hair done in Afrocentric cornrows with beads.

The pirates walk underwater for a surprise attack on the Royal Navy's ship and one of the foregrounded skeletons has his dreads flowing dramatically (the music supervisor missed a great opportunity here by not sticking Lee Scratch Perry's "Dreadlocks in Moonlight" on the soundtrack). In this sequence there's a direct allusion to *The Iliad*, one of the texts from which Medusa's story derives, the well known anecdote of the Trojan Horse. Two of the pirates are disguised as women to fool the Royal Navy, and one observes, "Oh, this is just like what the Greeks done at Troy. Except they was in a horse instead of dresses." The pirates' ship, *Black Pearl*, is declared by a Royal soldier to be "crewed by the damned and captained by a man so evil that hell itself spat him back out," and Sparrow explains to Will that it sails "from the dreaded Isla de Muerta" (island of death). The reference to Homer and the direct association of the pirates with hair like snakes who represent evil and death all point to Medusa.

By way of concluding I refer once more to *The Children of Sisyphus* in which the narrator's description of Sammy the garbage man's attitude towards Dreadlocks is indicative of the fear they inspire: "A fairly tall, well-built Rastafarian cultist came out of the little shop beside him and walked up to the cart. Sammy watched him with unwilling awe as he approached. He began to feel afraid. What was it? What was it this man had that he dreaded so much, that everybody feared so much?" (23) The narrator continues: "The unkempt locks of the cultists never failed to frighten him, for they always reminded him of a picture of Satan he had once seen in a Seventh Day Adventists' book for children." The young man from the university who addresses the Rastas gets to the heart of the real threat Rastas pose to the powers that be in Jamaican society, at the root of some of the fear they inspire: "All Jamaica, except you the Rastafarians and an emancipated few, are the slaves of an alien culture. And, most tragic of all, it is the Jamaican himself who is now his own slave-master. This, Brethren, this is the true heritage of colonialism!" (116) In other words, what Dinah, Sammy, and others, including apparently some in the West, fear is not just the dread image, but *what* the Dreads image: an infinite hope in repatriation to Africa, in particular, Ethiopia, their heaven on earth, and an insistent sovereignty (God within). As one of the Rasta leaders, Brother Solomon, explains to Cyrus, "There is another thing that they hide from us. The most important of all. And that is that man is God. The spirit of Rastafari is invested in every one of us." (50)

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of The Black Pearl premiered at Disney World in Orlando, of which Bruckheimer insists, "Where would you want to have the premiere, other than the place where it [the story] originated." But there is some irony in this claim on the DVD. The amusement ride, a facsimile, was perhaps first displayed at Disneyland Park in California in 1967. As such, it is the original of the ride that is the movie. But that ride is obviously based on many books, based on many stories, some of which have attained the level of myth, based on original characters who did pirate the Caribbean as well as some of the

people (early explorers, adventurers, and colonists) who were themselves pirating the Caribbean. In its method of delineating what catharsis is to be conjured from its meager plot, the film therefore merely continues the practice of exploiting the Caribbean. It does so through racial Othering with dreadlocks, which, as I have been arguing, are fearful symbols because they allude both to Medusa and to the African charge, from feared to revered, of Rastafarians not yet coopted by Babylon. “Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate’s life for me / We extort, we pilfer, we filch and sack,” indeed!