

The Quest
for Bread and
Justice in the
21st Century

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There have been three distinct points in my life at which I made a conscious decision to commit to a path that I knew would entail certain personal risks but that I also knew to be necessary if I was to maintain my notion of myself as bold and serious. Serious meant the capacity to act for the greater good. The first time, I was in my early 20s, already engaged in business—the production of logs and a small furniture-making operation—not uncomfortable but not wealthy, filled with the zeal of the possible. Guyana was then, in the early 1970s, a country that was overflowing with imagination, possibility and vision. We were a front-line state in the non-aligned movement, fighting hard at the United Nations on the decolonization of Namibia, hosting the African Caribbean and Pacific meetings in Georgetown, and were at the heart of inter-governmental processes at the UN. Life was about the building of a national culture that would redress and transcend our colonial past. It was the beginning of the end of foreign domination and Western oppression. Guyana's foreign policy was activist, forward-looking and committed to the war against injustice. One was proud to be Guyanese and associate with this internationalist solidarity.

At home, however, the strains of the ethnic divide were playing themselves out, most destructively at election time. Our divisions across ethnic lines deepened our undemocratic electoral practices and were a source of increasing discomfort. The internationalism grew hollower as the internal situation became more

fraught. How could the love of freedom begin beyond our borders? It was not possible to go on ignoring the contradiction. Onto this stage stepped the charismatic and eloquent activist historian, Walter Rodney. And there and then the decision that was to shape my life and that of so many others was taken—almost by default. Our task was nothing less than the assertion of people's power, beginning with the restoration of the right to choose a government in genuine elections. The quest for bread and justice was everywhere. The winds of change were gusting from Teheran to Managua to tiny Grenada right next door. There were no clearer sounds, no sweeter music in Guyana and the Caribbean than Rodney and Marley: we marched to the words of Bob Marley's *Redemption Song*.

*Old pirates, yes they rob I,
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit
But my hand was made strong
By the hand of the almighty
We forward in this generation
Triumphantly
All I ever had, is songs of freedom
Won't you help to sing, these songs of freedom
Cause all I ever had, redemption songs
Redemption Songs
Emancipate yourself from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our mind*

*Have no fear for atomic energy
Cause none of them can stop the times
How long will they kill our prophets
While we stand aside and look...¹*

There was no doubt in our minds that the poetry of Bob Marley and the harsher beat of Pete Tosh—"We want equal rights and justice"—were the beat of a struggle for all the downtrodden, historically oppressed people, in our country and in the developing world. The die was cast. The task could not be more clearly defined. My generation's duty was to man the barricades against the forces of neo-colonialism and at the same time to rally the country in the fight for genuine elections. One had to put one's house in order to make authentic the internationalism. And somewhere in my head the struggle from the bondage of slavery and indentureship, from colonialism to independence, was the same for our small Caribbean states as it was for women—a journey from oppression that would test us time and time again. In the words of the late and revered Martin Carter, an apostle of liberation and a friend of the downtrodden everywhere:

*"And only where our footprints end can tell
Whether the journey was an old advance
Or a new retreat: or whether in the dust
Our heel marks and our toe marks are confused"²*

Over the decades since—Rodney was killed by a car bomb in 1980, Marley died of cancer, Maurice Bishop was executed by his own comrades—I have come to understand that the quest for people's power—people-centred democracy, bread and justice for all, the emancipation from mental slavery, to quote Marley's song of Selassie's UN speech, "the dream of lasting peace...will remain nothing but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never attained"³ I have come to understand that there are formidable forces always reconvening, mutating and undermining the people's power. But every generation has its task and the task of the 21st century is global people's power, and the new enemy, the mutant, is not the state of the 20th century but the corporate state of the 21st. The milieu is not just the parliament but the market, and the power is not only in your vote but in your basket of goods; and the music is cyber sounds and the lyrics are swifter than sound and the power

is information. The cause is still the same—bread and justice.

This understanding was sharpened and expanded at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, and especially during the preparatory work for Rio when I attended a historic meeting in Miami in 1991—the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet. This was the second distinct point of my life. For me, not coming out of the women's movement but off the barricades of the wider political struggle, Miami was a revelation, especially as it came at a time when the political movement in Guyana and in the Caribbean as a whole seemed filled with the defeat of reason and possibility. With the implosion of the Grenada revolution, the surging tide of decolonization was halted and turned back. It was a time of reversal and reaction. In Guyana our country hemorrhaged away its expertise, talent, youth and wisdom to the very shores we once so scorned. Our political culture was party-centred, centralist and disempowering. This exacerbated a culture that saw the work and role of women as tangential and subservient to the role of the party. Miami opened my eyes to a new energy and a deeper understanding of the systems of oppression: oppression was not only oppression of our countries of the South, the so-called Third World, but it was also an oppression of gender and more significantly of nature itself. The Miami conference was assembled to consult on how to establish and develop a global framework for women's resistance and action. The Women's Action Agenda for the 21st Century, became a blueprint for Rio and for the 21st century. It was there that I met, for the first time, the late Bella Abzug and worked with Peggy Antrobus, heard Vandana Shiva. There could not have been better company while I immersed myself in the understanding that people's power was far more complex than I had ever imagined. The people were women too, they were not just something called "the poor", "the masses", "the South". The history of the people was a rich history of the fight of women for equality and equity. Recognize the reproductive and productive nature of women's work, our critical role in the maintenance of life and the health of the planet itself, and you know that women are the source of the people. The task of emancipation was both public and private, intergovernmental and in the household, in the state and in civil society, among all the actors. There could

be no peace without justice and no justice without gender justice, just as there could be no freedom without a reckoning of women's unpaid and unrecognized work, the counting of women's work in the household, in the economy and in the environment. I came to recognize and acknowledge that women were fighting the world over to secure the future for their great grandchildren. To challenge the notion that sustainable development could be achieved without women being central to the conceptualization of this development, without the redressing of their historical exclusion in decision-making in all processes, was our immediate and life-long task.

In Miami it was clear that if women did not demand their space, then the vision for the planet for the 21st century and beyond would find women on the periphery of the decision-making process. The conference was organized around a series of tribunals presided over by a number of eminent women judges from both the developed and developing world. Evidence was led; workshops were arranged on every thematic area that had to do with the visible and invisible role of women. Fifteen hundred women from 83 countries worked the many hours, sang, ate and shared in the new energy of a different world, a world where women would "change the nature of power not just enter the polluted stream." A world that would be worthy of our great, great grandchildren; a world, as the African proverb reminds us, that we have not inherited the earth from our ancestors we have borrowed it from our children.

Armed with the vitality and clarity of those heady days, women went home to organize for the preparatory meetings that began in New York in January for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED. The first draft text had few references to women. By the time the Summit was over, women's views were reflected in every chapter and in Chapter 24, Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development, as I recall, was the only text that went to Rio without a single bracket, fully negotiated in the preparatory process. I shall never forget the moment, at 4:45 am, when Tommy Koh of Singapore sounded the final gavel and

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we crawled out, weary but triumphant, having lifted the last bracket when the Vatican agreed to the paragraph that declared that women had the right to choose the timing and spacing of their families

according to their ethical values—the closest we could get to reproductive and sexual rights in 1992. By the time we hit the gate, the dawn was breaking in New York and the dawn had broken for women and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of the world. Some 1,700 NGOs were accredited to the Rio conference, the Earth Summit, in a new surge of democratization that brought an end to the era of the small, established groups of 200-odd NGOs which enjoyed a consultative status in the UN. Never again would women from the grassroots, women from the South, not speak in their own voice. Never again would the establishment NGOs circulate a statement to sign without our "prior informed consent". Never did the hopes for a safe and healthy planet seem so within reach. The rules of engagement had changed for all time.

Rio was only the beginning of a long march. When I came to locate the struggle of women for bread and justice into the wider struggle of humanity for sustainable livelihoods, Rio, which represented the third distinct point in my life, crystallized this as an imperative for all humanity. The saris and bubus, the jeans, the sarongs, the robes of the women of the world were to flow across many continents as we went to Barbados, to talk about small island states; to Vienna, to ensure that women's rights were universal human rights; to Cairo to ensure that the "D" in the population conference, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) had real meaning and built on the principles of Rio; to Copenhagen, to ensure that the paradigm was not going to be growth at any cost; to Beijing, the Fourth World Conference on Women, where we would gather up the threads and call for implementation; to Istanbul, to engage land reform and resource issues; to Rome, to talk about food and food security. Through it all, we were there to engage and unmask the market.

Is the struggle for people-centred development, the struggle for gender justice, to be “but-a fleeting illusion to be pursued but never attained?”⁴ We had to move our words from paper to action, united in our “otherness”. An otherness that began in our historic exclusion from the corridors of power, an otherness that should free us from backward and retentive responsibilities for a world that we had little to do with creating. We had to continue to struggle even against finance capital, against the World Trade Organization (WTO), within the World Bank, against the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Paradoxically, it was our very exclusion from the products of the two World Wars, or as I would call them the two European civil wars—the Bretton Woods Institutions and the United Nations itself—that was proving to be a source of empowerment. We were finding strength as we garnered our formidable resources, the capacities of more than half the people who walked the planet, the dreams of the producers of all labour, the keepers of the flame. We were filled with the passion of those who seek justice, driven by the cry of the girl child. Women have engaged the forces of a world that seeks to place money above people in every sphere of a system that is leading the planet to destruction. The 21st century will determine the fate of all humanity. At no time before in human history have we been confronted with choices that are so filled with dread. The lines have been drawn between us and those who would choose profit over people, designing a world that can discard 36 million Africans to HIV/AIDS. No war of guns has wrought such a toll on humanity. No system of oppression, not even slavery, has decimated such numbers so rapidly. In no previous period of human history have cures been as subjected to the whims and caprices of the moneychangers as it is today. There can be no letting up in the struggle for rights, for justice, for peace, for life itself.

In the face of new ravages and slaughter, I recall the arguments at Rio, around the alternative strategies that civil society wrote to further the principles of Rio, our insistence on a statement on militarism, for example, so conveniently omitted from Agenda 21 by the countries that made and sold arms.

When, not even a decade later, we count the bodies in Rwanda, in Sierra Leone, in Bosnia, in Liberia, in Sri Lanka, in Macedonia, in the Middle East, I have to wonder at our innocence. But then there are the successes, small but just as real—a World Bank that now speaks about gender rights, a Jubilee 2000 that marches on the G-8 to demand an end to the onerous and odious debt of the South, an international community that finds it difficult to justify a meeting that does not acknowledge women’s rights, a world in which farmers are refusing the inducements to plant genetically engineered foods. And then there was Seattle, when the big boys had to stop and listen. I know that the fight for justice has not been in vain.

But what is to be done to guarantee this centrality of the people and the rightful place of women? What is to be done to redress the wrongs, to render the planet healthy, to heal the planet from the excesses of chemicals and the heating of the atmosphere, to secure the future for the great grandchildren? What is to be done to make the world a fairer place in the 21st century?

The lines have been drawn between us and those who would choose profit over people, designing a world that can discard 36 million Africans to HIV/AIDS. No war of guns has wrought such a toll on humanity.

We must now act in our respective neighbourhoods even as we continue to work in solidarity on the regional and global level. I have sought in Guyana to bring the experience of my three distinct points together by pursuing sustainable practices in the utilization of Guyana’s forest resources and assisting in the economic empowerment of women. I no longer fell trees but instead produce furniture from renewable rainforest products—lianas. The furniture-making facility is located in a depressed community and enables women—and men—to learn new skills and is a modest statement on the traditional stewardship and skill of our indigenous peoples who reap these vines and roots, a people whose self-determining path has always been a light footprint on the ecology of our forest. In 1989, three years before Rio, the Government of Guyana dedicated to the international community one million acres of pristine rainforest to their stewardship to study and implement sustainable

tropical forest practices. Our work entails localizing of this quest for sustainability; both depend on the wider goodwill and interest of the larger community for their success.

“The Iwokrama International Centre sees the availability of companies like Liana Cane that can provide responsible business partnerships with communities living in and near key forest biodiversity areas such as the Iwokrama Forest as an essential prerequisite to the development of viable alternatives to the continued loss and destruction of tropical rain forest ecosystems. Their development is thus a key element in meeting the overall objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity—conservation, sustainable utilization and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of biodiversity”.

But Rio was more than about the environment. It was about development, the needs and rights of people and the critical role of women in the management of resources. It was also about distributive justice, about inter-generational equity and the promise of a world no less resourced than ours. It was essentially about responsibility to all life forms.

What are the new steps in the long march to end the abuse of people and resources, the feminization of poverty? To end the targeting of women’s fertility, the very loss of her face as in present-day Afghanistan? Rio put paid to the notion that the issue of sustainability was that too many people—poor people, especially poor women birthing—were burning forests for firewood and gobbling up scarce resources. What it revealed was that the real users were those who were overconsuming. The issue was not the excesses of the poor, but the excesses of the rich—rich people and rich nations. Most women did not see it as an issue of negotiating away one’s privileged lifestyle. Where are the answers? Who are the marchers? We must go back to the vision, the hope and the energy of Rio. The task is to globalize the people’s rights and not the right and might of money. The task is not to talk about good governance but to live it.

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In my view, nothing will be fixed until we bring about fundamental changes in the structures of power and politics, until the people, especially women ensure that their representatives are faithful to their ideals. At the political level, women must organize to enter all the decision-making fora. It must mean that we wage, at an organizational level, worldwide campaigns to ensure that the numerous commitments to gender equality at the institutional level become reality.

The issues that surround the absence of a critical mass of women in the decision-making fora—the parliaments, the ministries, especially those that control expenditure, finance and planning, the ministries of environment that oversee resource use and maintenance, to name the most crucial ones—determine not only the lives of women but of society as a whole. It is no longer possible for governments and women themselves to ignore the evidence of their own exclusion and the growing body of work that proves that women’s political empowerment leads to the redressing of some of the worst aspects of policies that continue to ignore the views and interests of more than half the world’s population.

This would mean that women are obliged to agitate to ensure that women everywhere are included at the decision-making points and are direct beneficiaries of resources. It would mean, say, that Canadian taxpayers and women and other organizations determine and insist that Canadian aid and policies be gender sensitive, that the resources that Canada gives to developing countries be allocated in a proportion in all programs, macro and micro, that guarantees that half of these resources be dedicated to, accessed by and benefit women directly.

It would also mean that women’s organizations in both the recipient and the donor countries be more actively involved in the fulfillment of the same inter-governmental commitments which after all, provide at

best a minimum platform. We know that anything that wins the agreement of 183 governments can only provide the minimum. Women must continue to mobilize to implement the goals of Beijing, making them time bound, and establish watch committees that report regularly on progress. Citizens have a duty to enforce the honouring of these commitments by their governments at home and abroad.

In order to ensure that women are receiving the financial resources needed for their sustainable livelihood and that of their families, governments committed in Copenhagen to “create a focus in national development plans and budgets on investment in human capital, with special policies and programs directed at rural areas, the urban poor, women and children”.

So women must increase their advocacy around the Gender Budget Initiatives that are being advanced by some governments, the Commonwealth Secretariat and UNIFEM. If we set ourselves the goal of developing the relevant indicators needed to reveal the progress of women and make those indicators mainstream, if we advocate and intensify the lobbying for the counting of women’s unpaid work everywhere, recognizing that new national account systems would have to be developed as a standard, then we can provide the “rigorous economic data” to move the paradigm to reflect the true nature of the contribution women make to productive and reproductive work.

While we work worldwide to improve and extend our advocacy and to deliver the goals of the conferences since Rio in which women have fought for a new economic paradigm, one that does not accept the growth/trickle down model, we must urgently redouble our efforts to impact on the United Nations Financing For Development Conference in March 2002. We must immediately engage all of our theoreticians and activists of the women’s movement and all others who are committed to a view of human development that puts people first to become fully engaged at a national and international level in defining the financial path to sustainable development. We women must remobilize

our own organizations to monitor these intergovernmental deliberations and scrutinize the workings of our governments at the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO and the United Nations. We must develop the tools for screening their decisions at home, nationally and locally, and internationally as well. After all, as the mantra goes, this is a global village, one world. And indeed, we know that what women buy in their supermarkets in Greenland and in Chile, at the opposite poles of the world, determine whether children breathe fresh air in Greenland or are immunized in Chile. The environment is seamless, and more and more the effects of our consumer choices determine the health of people and of the planet. And while this may have always been so, the speed of impact is faster and more pervasive than it has ever been in history.

It is equally vital that while we develop the tools to monitor the formal economy, we widen and deepen our knowledge of the other economy, what many people in the under-developing world are beginning to call the “real economy”, the economy that is based on the trafficking of drugs, women, children, arms, and money itself, the so-called hot money. We must increase our understanding of the way in which states and financial power centres have shifted their attention from commodities to services. We must look for the parallel realities in our own backyards. This millennium is marked by the contradiction between too much information and too little action. With all this knowledge, are people in fact living better lives? Indeed some sectors of humanity may be living longer, but poverty and disparity are on the rise everywhere.

As women, and as activists for change and global justice, we must agitate to ensure that the global institutions—the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN itself—reflect the same standards of representativeness and democracy that we argue national governments must now attain. The same principles of rights must be applicable. The handful of the most powerful governments in the world must not be permitted to occupy all the decision-making space.

We women must remobilize our own organizations to monitor these intergovernmental deliberations and scrutinise the workings of our governments at the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, the United Nations.

In order to redress this lack of transparency, democracy and representation in these global institutions, it must become a matter of urgent concern for the citizens of the developed world.

Nowhere is the lack of justice and the basic human rights of peoples more violated than in the pharmaceutical empires, those that deny medicines to the millions of people dying of HIV/AIDS. We are asked to accept that the intellectual property rights of these corporations (read: profits) are more important than the right to life of some 40 million poor people. How can we talk of a world that is fairer when we live with the sheer absurdity of this fact? What intellectual property, itself based on the congealed knowledge of all humanity, can override the right to life of 40 million or more people? Which corporation, which shareholder, which share, could so undervalue 40 million human lives, mostly black lives? According to Andrew Natsios, head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the money raised by the new global fund to fight AIDS should not be wasted on the anti-retroviral drugs, certainly not in Africa which is too backward to be helped. "Many Africans," Mr. Natsios has pronounced, "don't know what Western time is. You have to take these (AIDS) drugs a certain number of hours each day, or they don't work. Many people in Africa have never seen a clock or a watch their entire lives. And if you say, one o'clock in the afternoon, they do not know what you are talking about. They know morning, they know noon, they know evening, they know the darkness at night." Now we know. Africans cannot tell time.

I am forced to remember once again the immortal line of Haile Selassie's speech and of Bob Marley's song: "Until the colour of a man's skin is no more important than the colour of his eyes...it's a war."⁵

And it must be our only war. We must refuse to deny life. We must rise up against the blurring images of endless want, the haunting eyes of the dying and the hungry. We must remove the veil from our own eyes and see the centuries of injustice wrought by the

system of a financial architecture that is eroding the very foundation of our humanity. We must see. And we must act accordingly.

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In Copenhagen in 1995 the international community committed to "accelerating the economic, social and human resource development of Africa and the least developed countries". And specifically to "take all necessary measures to ensure that communicable diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis do not reverse the progress made in economic and social development".

Today, as I write these words, June 13th 2001, it is the 21st anniversary of the assassination of Walter Rodney, the Guyanese historian activist and martyr, who wrote the seminal work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Twenty-one years after his death, we are confronted once again with a new form of the old genocide that slavery was. Once again Africa is to lose, not through centuries of slave trade, but after a mere decade of the new imperialism, many more millions of her children under the not-so-new terms of trade that makes a race, a people, less than human, no doubt the new primitives, the heathens of development as some wish to argue. The digital divide has now superceded the human divide.

There is every urgent need for the pharmaceutical companies to be brought to heel by those citizens who have shares, those citizens within whose countries their lavish head offices reside and those voters who determine their national policies that permit sanctions to be carried out against governments, whatever their complexion, who are powerless to fight the ravages of the WTO. No longer can ordinary women and men of the developed world permit such excesses, nor can ignorance any longer be a reason for inaction. We dare not go on mirroring the same divisions of class, race and poverty in our own societies. The issues we are up against are real issues that kill real people who have real children. That should be the bottom line: life not profit.

If there is political will, we can, overnight, change the terms of living for millions of people. We need only implement one of the proposals for funding the means to address the financing of these development goals and commitments, namely the Tobin Tax that would place a small charge of 0.1 to 0.2 percentage points on foreign exchange transactions, levied at an agreed common rate by all countries where they originate in significant amounts.

Our task in this year and for this century must be to acquire the joint resolve, as women, to engage the question of rights, including important economic rights and responsibilities. As women of the women's movement and as women and men who care about the rights and needs of others, we must ready ourselves to offer the representation to change the nature of the power structures. We must resolve to not only "get the balance right" by advocating and organizing for gender balance in government, but also resolve to hold governments accountable to the goals of sustainable human development that they signed on to in the endless non-binding treaties of the UN that continue to speak more honestly to the vision of a just world—those goals that we worked so hard to fashion. We must not permit them to honour only their economic and trade treaties—the rules-based treaties of the IFIs and the WTO—that elevate money above life. We must work for policy coherence in all fora at home and abroad. The gap between policy articulation and implementation must be brought to an end.

In the end, whether we argue in the domain of the political, the economic, health, environmental or cultural, we can only change the world and make it a fairer place by involving all people. We must change the nature of power, as women, as decent and caring citizens, by an unbridled activism centred on equality between men and women to shape the future of countries and the planet. To move forward into the 21st century, we should heed the words of Bella Abzug: "Now that we have all the words we must put them to music." We must act for the generations to come. We must deny the divide between men and women, between rich and poor people and rich and poor nations. We must act for all humanity. A world in which one man is worth more than the collective resources of 3.5 billion people is not a world that can

sustain us all. It is a world in which greed overcomes needs and rights. It is an unfair and turbulent world—ultimately a world that is unsafe for all.

As was said in Rio, "Human beings are the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature."

In the words of the UN Charter, "We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small, ... and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom."⁶

That freedom can only become larger when all the institutions that purport to speak for democracy, that purport to speak for the people, are themselves free of the domination of the few.

I close with the words of our Guyanese poet Martin Carter:

*No!
I will not still my voice!
I have
too much to claim—
if you see me looking at books or coming to your house
or walking in the sun
know that I look for fire!*

*I have learnt
from books dear friend
of men dreaming and living
and hungering in a room without a light
who could not die since death was far too poor
who did not sleep to dream, but dreamed to change the
world.*

*And so
if you see me
looking at your hands
listening when you speak
marching in your ranks
you must know
I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world'*

Jocelyn Dow, of Guyana, is the President of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), an international advocacy network which seeks to increase the power of women worldwide as policy-makers and in policy-making institutions and other fora. An activist at the national, regional and international levels, Dow is a founding member and Executive Director of Red Thread, a Guyanese women's collective. As a businesswoman, Dow is committed to environmentally-sound development, exemplified in her furniture company which is based on the sustainable use of non-timber forest products. Dow has served as a former board member of the Caribbean Conservation Association and as a Member of the Guyana Elections Commission and of the External Gender Consultative Group of the World Bank.

Notes

- 1 Redemption Song by Bob Marley, 1980. Reprinted with permission from the Bob Marley Foundation
- 2 Martin Carter, "Only where our footprints end", published in *Poems of Succession*, New Beacon Books, 1977.
- 3 Excerpt from a speech by His Majesty Haile Selassie I given to the United Nations, February 1968.
- 4 Haile Selassie, *ibid.*
- 5 Haile Selassie, *ibid.*, and Bob Marley's adaptation "War".
- 6 The Charter of the United Nations (Preamble) 1945
- 7 Taken from the poem "Looking at your hands", published in the book *The Hill of Fire Glows Red*, 1951