

Dr Satan's Echo Chamber

Louis Chude-Sokei in conversation with Michael McMillan

Michael McMillan (MM): You have referred to your hybrid/mixed Nigerian and Jamaican background. How has that shaped your cultural formation, positionality and transdisciplinary practice as a scholar?

Louis Chude-Sokei (LCS): Now that I've produced an actual memoir that is imminent (*Floating in A Peculiar Way*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), I can admit that much of my work has always been memoir-istic in that it's been rooted in my experience within/around/outside multiple, distinct Black identities, cultures and histories – all of which deal with racism and colonialism but from quite varied historical vantage points and in sometimes divergent ways. I'd toss African-American into this biographical mix because I've always described myself as half Nigerian, half Jamaican and half Black American – bad math but absolutely accurate.

So from Pan-Africanism to Diaspora, from the continent to the Middle Passage to the 'new' worlds, my work has followed my actual migration and the evolving tastes and issues I've encountered. It's meant that I've been unable and unwilling to 'root' myself in any specific Blackness given how contested Black roots are in the Black diaspora itself (we habitually speak of Africa and Diaspora as fixed or legible or cohesive entities, but they are always fragmented and contested, not just due to colonialism and white supremacy but by the raw diversity of Black experiences and responses to colonialism and white supremacy).

MM: This leads to thinking about the Black Diaspora as a 'changing same'

process that touches on Stuart Hall's idea of diaspora as metaphor, Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic', and Kobena Mercer's 'rhizomatic network of aesthetic exchange and borrowings' rather than on a crucible of homogenous social and cultural meanings where Africa still have relevance. How do you think this plays out in the 'sounding' of sound system culture?

LCS: Exactly that: the *rhizomatic* – the Deleuze and Guattari idea to be specific – as that which expands and contests 'arborescent ecologies', as they put it: those systems of meaning that fix on roots and stability. Or, as Edouard Glissant would put it in his Caribbean take on Deleuze and Guattari, that fixate on origins and return. It is because diaspora is metaphor – as is race, as Africa also often is – that's why I've hewn to literary and sonic forces of cultural production. It was in literature and 'theory' that I was able to train in the politics of metaphor and expand it to the material sphere of culture.

Now, it is no accident that Hall, Gilroy and Mercer to a lesser extent fixate on 'culture', because that is where metaphors are transmuted into both materialities and 'reality' – which, though fetishized in Jamaican vernacular, is often just another metaphor. These critics also allude to sound systems, or at least reggae. Glissant as well. For peoples who come from an oral historical base and who are not necessarily privileged by access to the written word, which in colonial societies signified class hierarchies and power, music is the privileged site of cultural meaning-making. Not just individual artistic metaphor, but collective meaning-making. And given that reggae music was in my time so dominated by the metaphors of Africa, race, colonialism, migration and the equally metaphoric 'realities' of sex, gender and violence, it was inevitable that I would gravitate to the music. And if you get serious about the music and the community that participates in it most intimately, well you get drawn into the sound systems.

For a perpetual immigrant, that particular music was for much of my life the closest thing to home I could imagine or theorize. Music, after all, enables a curious mix of belonging and strangeness. With it you can be both insider and outsider of a culture at the same time. Music is also the space of longing, of desire, and it was always clear to me that the plaintive longing of roots reggae – for home, for stability, for unity, for Africa, for Zion – and the less plaintive longings for bodies, sex, desire, manhood, womanhood, revenge and fulfillment, were all being narrated via the metaphor of Africa. And in the realm of sound.

MM: How does echo as a metaphor unpack the ‘science’ of reggae and dub in the context of the sonic diasporic migration of sound system culture that you develop in *Dr Satan’s Echo Chamber*?

LCS: Echo is repetition, it is reciprocity. It is seeing/hearing the self replicated, doubled, *dubbed*. It is also narcissism, hearing only yourself, haunted and trapped by your own history and biases.

My methodology in *Dr Satan’s Echo Chamber* (2020) and *The Sound of Culture* (2016) is rooted in that process. It is a migratory process, so the movement of the *material apparatus* of sound system culture (not just metaphors) from, say, Jamaica to Britain in that colonial/post-imperial context, or from Jamaica to the Bronx, New York and mutating into hip hop, and then the music and iconography and production styles travelling ‘back to Africa’ and helping transition local music scenes in Africa eventually into the Afro-beats of today – all of that maps out a Diasporic echo chamber of reflections and interpretations. Also, reflections of reflections, interpretations of interpretations, decay, distortion and volume across vistas of space, time and history and noise.

Now, reggae did not invent that process. It can be traced back to the

late nineteenth century and to the beginnings of sound recording which popularized and extended the meanings that were coded in Black bodies in transit. It's there in blackface minstrelsy, which I've written extensively about, particularly in *The Last 'Darky'* (2005), which is about West Indian immigrants performing stereotypes of African American identity in a context defined by both Black solidarity and Black on Black prejudice. But reggae, even more than jazz, enshrined that problematic but productive echoic ping-pong process. It canonized these metaphors and narratives in the global Black *popular* imagination like no other form of indigenous culture.

MM: In *The Sound of Culture* there is the fascinating concept that sound has been the primary nexus of race and technology that can be traced back to the jazz age and notions of primitivist modernism in the context of new technologies of 'massification'. How is Afro-futurism signified in jazz to reggae, hip hop to electronic dance music through this intersection between race, machine and technology?

LCS: Well, the fact of technology – whether or not you have access to it, indeed especially if you *don't* have direct access to it – signifies 'the future'. It is, again, a metaphor – of development, of power, of perhaps 'the West', but certainly of a network of ideas that those on the margins of those ideas crave access to or wish to echo or version.

It has been the case that, from the early part of the twentieth century to the present, the primary zone of Black access to technology has been sound recording. Black abilities have rarely been questioned here and arguments about Black *superiority* were claimed very early in the development of that technology. Certainly Black bodies were seen as supremely animalistic, hence

the fetish for Black bodies and dance during eras of primitivism; but early discussions of the superiority of Black vocal tones, on early phonographs for example, as well as the use of Black images from minstrelsy and the popularity of Coon Songs from minstrel theatre sealed the relationship between 'the negro' and 'the talking machine' early in the twentieth century.

Blackness and technology is here sanctified in media and culture via sound. Blacks would then engage those equations to assert, subvert, invert modernity via popular music – early jazz in particular, which though now represented as 'organic' was heard in the 1920s as machine age or industrial-era music (as were the elaborate, syncopated dances). Reggae, hip hop, techno and other variants of Black musical sound only depend on the race/technology nexus as established in this late nineteenth/early twentieth century period (the same period of the development of what will be called 'science fiction' in the early 1920s).

'The Negro' was associated or contrasted with the brute animal, and the machine; the soulless beast and the mindless automaton, or robot. These are the seeds and base elements of what could be/will be called 'Afro-futurism'. Blacks then appropriate technology and those metaphoric associations via sound in order to articulate racial experiences and visions as well as generating distinct futures that are direct products of Black people's own reevaluation of the past. This latter point reminds us that Afro-futurism is far less futuristic than it often thinks. This dynamic has actually been around from at least since the 'new' Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance and their use of Jazz and Africa to push for a future-oriented set of Black political and cultural transformations in the wake of slavery and the migration of Blacks from the South and the Caribbean into New York and other East Coast cities in the early twentieth century.

MM: Could you say something about 'Black technopoetics' in relation to sound system culture, especially dub in relation to science fiction which has genealogies in relation to race, machine and technology, and to master, slave (robots) and coloniality?

LCS: 'Black technopoetics' synthesizes the metaphoric associations between Black and machines I've been talking about. Despite a history that suggested that machines or technology was 'white' or belonged to the colonisers/slavers, the cultural practices that fetishize technology as a privileged space of Black access and production – like sound systems – is what I've focused on. And this should now be seen/explored far beyond sound.

Key to my arguments have been that if we see/hear Black music as being about rhythm or voice or lyrics or protest we may miss the fact that sound production is about infomatics, about programming, about technological virtuosity. These 'ghetto' practices provide a feedback loop as Black cultural priorities in using those technologies become reinserted into the chain of production as mainstream designers and companies respond by redesigning their own products, for example, to make them more sensitive to bass and tonal saturation. So, not only is it about the Black redefinition of how sound is made, it is also about how technology is consumed and domesticated via racial inputs (the obsession with Coon Songs and the use of blackface iconography to market phonographs and sheet music in the early twentieth century was merely the beginning). Again, this wasn't invented in Jamaican sound systems, but it most certainly was amplified.

As to sci-fi: that dub music, Rastafarians and other aspects of Caribbean culture would emerge in crucial works of genre-shaping white science fiction in the 1980s, just when reggae and hip hop went fully digital (William

Gibson's 'cyberpunk' work most notably, but also Emma Bull and any number of films), signified that this particular genre was tuning in to the history of 'creole' uses of technology to articulate fictions of space – outer and inner – race and science. I've not focused very much on Black SF or Afrofuturist SF for many reasons, but one is that I felt we need a history of the very genre itself because notions of race and colonialism were there from its inception, well in advance of Afrofuturism. To be clear about this: science fiction, fantasy and horror have always had race in their generic DNA.

As to dub: in its initial heyday the form was replete with images of robots, space ships, mixing boards as control systems, studios as laboratories, engineers as 'scientists', or 'chemists', producers as mad professors. This told the story of a 'Black technopoetics' gone large in the popular, largely working-class imagination. It also told the story of an indigeneous subgenre of science fiction that operated in the sphere of music and sound system culture but was clearly about much more than just music. The musical obsession with space, echo, noise and memory in dub was in conversation with those issues of race, Africa, colonialism, technology. My task has been to give this context a history, and that history was/is diasporic – jazz, and nineteenth and early twentieth century writers who told stories of Blacks and machines, or Blacks as machines. Indeed, in the wake of science fiction, the language of masters and slaves is embedded in the language of engineering, robotics and Artificial Intelligence. Again, this is a history that not only predates 'Afro-futurism', *it predates science fiction itself!*

Louis Chude-Sokei's work includes *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black on Black Minstrelsy and the African Diaspora*, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* and the memoir, *Floating in A Most Peculiar Way*. He teaches at Boston University, directs the African American Studies Program and is Editor in Chief of the journal, *The Black Scholar*. He collaborates with noted electronic experimentalists, Mouse on Mars and is currently curating the state sponsored sound art project at the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, Germany.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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