

‘Sense mek before book’: Dubpoetry and sound system in the Black British literary imagination

Michael McMillan

night number one was in BRIXTON:
SOFRANO B sound system
was a beating out a rhythm with a fire,
coming doun his reggae-reggae wire;
it was a sound shaking doun your spinal column,
a bad music tearing up your flesh;
and the rebels them start a fighting,
the yout them jus turn wild.
It's war amongst the rebels:
madness...madness... war. (Johnson 1976: 19)

As a site of Black music, orality and dance, sound system has been explored since the 1970s in work by Black artists who were born or grew up in Britain. But the elephant in the room is dubpoetry, as can be heard from ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s 1976 poetry collection *Dread, Beat and Blood* published by Bogle-L’Ouverture, one of the first Black publishers in Britain. Coming from an oral tradition, dubpoetry has synergy with the rhythms of reggae music, along with toasters/MCs chatting on the ‘mic’ of the sound, or DJs/rappers ‘spitting lyrics’ in hip hop; the only difference being, like jazz-poetry, dub is performed to a literary audience as poetry. In this community of practice, poetry is also expressed in creoles, or ‘nation languages’ as they are called by Kamau Brathwaite in his profoundly influential *History of the Voice* (1984), and they can, created by the colonised,

cause anxieties in the master tongue of the coloniser as the creolisation of an English lexicon with an African grammar, rhythm and sound. Equally, performing Black bodies are feared, yet desired, and Black performance is appropriated, yet dismissed, because Black culture is loved, but not Black people. Of performance, rather than simply on the page, dubpoetry's cultural politics are inscribed in the ways in which it has been a disruptive technology in poetry and disturbed the Eurocentric worship of the written word in literature. This disruptive force is loud and clear in Levi Tafari's 'Blues Dance Sufferers Style', Jean 'Binta' Breeze's 'Riddym Ravings' and Khadijah Ibrahiim's 'Sound Vibrations' – dub poems that can be read and heard as part of this Sonic Vibrations guest edition of *WritersMosaic*.

As the Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris suggests, the term dubpoetry is pre-figured in Linton Kwesi Johnson's 1976 article, 'Jamaican Rebel Music':

The 'dub-lyricist' is the dj turned poet. He intones his lyrics rather than sings them. Dub lyricism is a new form of (oral) music-poetry, wherein the lyricist overdubs rhythmic phrases on to the rhythm background of a popular song. Dub-lyricists includes poets like Big Youth, I Roy, U Roy, Dillinger, Shorty the President, Prince Jazzbo and others (quoted in Morris 1997:1).

Like Linton, the Jamaican dubpoet Oku Onuora was inspired by reggae, and other 'poets' such as Bob Marley and the Wailers, poetry performed to music, as well as by African American jazz-poets – The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron and Langston Hughes (Morris, 1997). In this multi-rooted, rhizoid network of transcultural and diasporic exchange, transfer and appropriation across the African diaspora, can be found the aesthetic trajectories and transformational challenge of Black music and dubpoetry. What Paul Gilroy

calls 'the Black Atlantic' (1993) comes to mind here, a transatlantic space that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean or Black European, but all of these at once. In this context, poets who use the dubpoetic form include from Jamaica: Mikey Smith, Oku Onuora, Mutabaruka, Jean 'Binta' Breeze; from Canada: Afua Cooper, Lillian Allen and Ahdri Zhina Mandiela; and from Britain: Benjamin Zephaniah, Levi Tafari and Khadijah Ibrahiim.

However, the list of 'dub-lyricists' that Johnson cites – Big Youth, Dillinger, U Roy and others – are rarely accorded literary status as poets, much like calypsonians such as Mighty Sparrow in the past, or rappers like Kendrick Lamar now. Why is this? Well, the dub in dubpoetry comes from reggae recording technology in which sounds are added and/or removed, making the poetry a product of the sound system. Sound system is part of popular culture, the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, and the traditions of the people, a 'Caribbean machine' which some literary culture elites see as 'vulgar'. Also, dubpoetry is usually a politically focused attack on oppression and injustice in 'nation language', or what Rastafarians describe as 'words, sounds and power'; it is political. Oku Onuora articulates its spirit in the following way:

Dub poetry simply mean to take out and to put in, but more fi put in more than anthing else. We take out the little isms, the little English ism and the little highfatulin business and the little penta-metre... (Onuora, cited in Morris 1997: 2-3).

The godmother of nation language in poetry is, of course, Louise 'Miss Lou' Bennett of Jamaica. As a storyteller, historian, praise singer, poet and musician, Miss Lou continued the oral tradition of the African griot, but in the contemporary language and reality of a newly independent island:

Sun a-shine but tings noh bright,
Doah pot a-bwile, bickle noh stuff,
River flood but water scarce yaw,
Rain a-fall dutty tuff! (Bennett 1966:120)

In Miss Lou's lyrical oppositions, the sun shines but things aren't bright; the sunshine of a tropical tourist brochure brings no light to the lives of people struggling to survive. The line, 'Rain a-fall dutty tuff' (rain falls but the ground is hard) is echoed by Bob Marley & The Wailers in the song 'Them Belly Full' (1976), along with Miss Lou's use of oppositions for critical commentary, as in 'a belly full, but them hungry', which refers to malnutrition.

Nation language is usually written phonetically, and meaning comes in reading it aloud. Live performance was and is intrinsic to 'publishing' for poets like Miss Lou and the later dubpoets, as well as 'poets' on the sound system whose poems become music products in different black music genres. These poets are often telling stories about the people they are performing to, in the here and now; it is an experiment like all live performance, because 'sense mek before book', in other words, meaning comes before it's in a book.

We see this living performance poetry with Benjamin Zephaniah, who relies on performance skills developed toasting/DJing on sound systems to communicate his dubpoetry with live audiences. He became popular for the 'bouncing bundle of high-kicking boots, facial distortions and flying dreadlocks' (Habekost 1993:100) whenever he performed 'Dis Policeman keeps on kicking me to death'. Not all dub poets or performance poets perform in

the same way, as witness the relative stillness in Linton Kwesi Johnson's performances as described by the German dubpoet, Christian Habekost:

...capitalizing on the reserve bordering on the diffidence that holds him back from histrionic expression: his frozen appearance is the deliberate attempt to let the words speak for themselves, undisturbed by additional performative means that might divert the audience's attention... (cited in Morris 1997: 7)

Mervyn Morris adds that the visual focus in Johnson's performance is made compelling by his trademark trilby hat, and remarks on the live engagement he makes with his voice and performance choices in varying the rhythm, phrasing, volume and texture. The 'reserve' which Habekost notices is also reminiscent of a 'speaky spokey' Caribbean oral imitation of English enunciation that was imbued in the colonial education system of soon-to-be postcolonial subjects; and I'm thinking here of the performance style of Caribbean poets such as the late E. A. Markham and James Berry.

Both literary and academic establishments have resisted the term 'dubpoetry', and some dub poets and performance poets see 'dub' and 'performance' prefixed to poetry as limiting because of these politics. Performative Caribbean poets like John Agard, Grace Nichols, Kei Miller, Roger Robinson and others might share a similar perspective to Johnson, when he says, 'I've always seen myself as a poet full stop'. Similarly, Mutabaruka says, 'My poetry is just: poetry'; and in a 1986 interview, Jean 'Binta' Breeze remarks, 'I'd rather say I am a poet and write some dub poems than say I am a dub poet' (Habekost 1993: 3).

Nevertheless, individual poets have gained exposure under the banner of dubpoetry, though dubpoetry has also become a victim of its own success with many jumping on the bandwagon with inconsistent work. As Gordon Rohlehr succinctly puts it, 'Dub poetry at its worst is a kind of tedious jabber to a monotonous rhythm. At its best it is the intelligent appropriation of the manipulatory techniques of the DJ for purposes of personal and communal signification'. (Rohlehr et al. 1989: 18).

Dubpoetry emerged at a moment of radical Black activism which in Britain was expressed in a cultural renaissance. We began to have Black independent publishers like Bogle-L'Overture, New Beacon Books and Black Ink Collective, publishing literature by Black writers, but there were also Black arts practitioners establishing theatre and dance companies, making films and running art galleries as part of a movement to express our presence, fight oppression and enlarge our freedom. The antecedents of this movement were African, American and Caribbean artists, writers and musicians like Aubrey Williams, Frank Bowling, James Baldwin, Sam Selvon, Andrew Salkey, George Lamming, Buchi Emecheta, Fela Kuti and Bob Marley, who all lived in Britain at some point. But what distinguished this renaissance was that a new generation of artists and writers were expressing their lived experience of growing up and being Black in Britain.

Encountering sound system culture was part of this lived experience, which thematically found emergence in fiction such as Amon Saba Saakana's 1985 novel *Blues Dance*, in which the police raid on a sound system dance politicises the main protagonist in his struggle against racism in London. Blackbeard, aka Dennis Bovell, the renowned reggae producer, was falsely

imprisoned for playing his Sufferah Hi Fi at the Metro Youth Club in Ladbroke Grove. His experience is partially the narrative of Franco Rosso's seminal 1981 film *Babylon*, for which Bovell produced the soundtrack, and where Jah Shaka plays himself and directs a soundclash in the climatic scene. In that same year, Menelik Shabazz's film *Burning an Illusion* plays lovers rock in the sound system dance and focuses on the politicisation of the young Black British woman. Across art forms, Denzil Forrester's paintings 'Dub Skank' (1979) or 'Blue Jay' (1987), created in situ or soon after, capture the vibrant energy of a sound system session.

The writer Alex Wheatle was a founding member of the Crucial Rocker sound system and, as DJ Hardman, he wrote lyrics about Brixton life which later informed the narrative of his first novel, *Brixton Rock* (1999), as well as *East of Acre Lane* (2001) set during the 1981 uprisings in Brixton. 'I lifted the language straight out of the mouths of the sound system guys,' he says, 'hustlers, rootsheads, bad boys, lovers' rock dreamers and weed warriors that I knew and placed it on the page without any apology' (Wheatle, 2016). His story is also the basis of *Alex Wheatle*, one of the five films in Steve McQueen's critically acclaimed drama series, *Small Axe* (2020), about the Black British experience. Novelist Courttia Newland was originally an aspiring rapper, and released a drum and bass record before becoming an author; music features in much of his work, such as *A Book of Blues* (2011). Newland also co-wrote *Lovers Rock* with Steve McQueen as part of the *Small Axe* series, recreating the style, culture and atmosphere of an African Caribbean house party with a romance between two young Black people at its centre, something rarely seen on British television. Sound system is also a central concept in Ras Mykha's 2015 children's picture book, *The*

Sonar System, in which planets orbit a gigantic, pulsating speaker instead of a sun. Two theatre shows were Leigh Jackson's play *Reggae Britannia* (1979, Royal Court Theatre) and Amani Napthali's *Ragamuffin* (1989, Oval House), an allegorical trial connecting the Haitian slave revolt of 1804 with the Broadwater uprisings of 1985, involving the audience in call and response as the jury.

Meanwhile, as the American writer Louis Chude-Sokei (2016) suggests, transatlantic terror of [Jamaican drug posses \(read, Yardies\)](#), the radical transformation of reggae from analogue to digital form, and urban subcultures like punk turning to reggae and dub in their affinities with Caribbean migrant and sound culture, began to emerge in the narratives of cyberpunk authors. For instance, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) popularised the term 'cyberspace' and introduced Rastafarians into science fiction with the technocreolised dreadlocked Zionites (with their deep-space cruiser, the *Marcus Garvey*), who employ technology on their own terms and within their own cosmology. 'Rastas in space' exoticism became part of the visual lexicon of cyberpunk in films like *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension* and John Sayles's *The Brother from Another Planet*, both out in 1984. For Chude-Sokei, the emergence of a Black 'techno-primitivism' in science fiction (Chude-Sokei 2016: 158) represents a utopian alternative not to whites but to machines; a romantic racism reminiscent of the lost-race fictions (think Wakanda in the *Black Panther* film) and the 'intruder gone native on another planet' fictions based on *The Tempest* (think *Forbidden Planet* (1956)). 'The primitive seems always necessary' says Chude-Sokei, 'in narratives that explore what happens when whites reach their social, cultural, or technological borders.' (Chude-Sokei 2016: 158)

The new broom sweeps clean but the old one knows every corner, and this is admittedly my generational gaze at nation language and sound system orature as the symbolic locus of dubpoetry, as well as a brief mapping of sound system culture in the Black British literary imagination. In looking at the past through the lens of the present, this survey testifies to the importance of the archive, particularly the turn towards a multi-media literature across the Black diaspora during these changing times. Without this history, the contribution which Black writers have made to literature in English that begins with Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African* of 1789, is either erased, hidden or ignored. Moreover, like any disruptive technology, dubpoetry is of the future, and like Black music keeps alive the nation languages that have now creolised the vernacular of Western societies.

Bibliography

Benítez Rojo, Antonio (1997) *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bennett, Louise (1966) *Jamaica Labrish*, Kingston: Sangter's Book Stores.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau (1984) *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean*. London: New Beacon.

Chude-Sokei, Louis (2016) *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Gilroy, Paul (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Habekost, Christian (1993) *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry*, Amsterdam, Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V.

- Johnson, Linton Kwesi (1975) *Dread Beat and Blood*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture.
- Johnson, Linton Kwesi (1976) 'Jamaican Rebel Music', *Race and Class*, XVII, 4, 398.
- Johnson, Linton Kwesi (1979) *Forces of Victory*. Island.
- Mercer, Kobena (1994) *Welcome to the jungle: new positions in black cultural studies*. London: Routledge.
- Morris, Mervyn (1997) 'Dub Poetry?', *Caribbean Quarterly*, Dec. Vol. 43, No.4, pp1-10).
- Newland, Courttia (2011) *A Book of Blues*. London: Flambard Press.
- Rohlehr, Gordon, Stewart Brown and Mervyn Morris (eds.) (1989) *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry*. Harlow: Longman.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi wa (1986) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London: Heinemann Educational.
- Wheatle, Alex (1999) *Brixton Rock*. London: Arcadia Books.
- Wheatle, Alex (2001) *East of Acre Lane*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Wheatle, Alex (2016) 'Writing YA fiction requires new skillsets: slang dates more swiftly than X Factor winners', *The Guardian*, 25 October.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

© Michael McMillan