



IN SEARCH OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION: THE DIALECTICS OF RACE, POLITICS, AND LITERATURE IN CARIBBEAN DUB POETRY

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Received 23 March 2017; accepted 27 July 2017

This article examines dub poetry as an artistic form located along several borderlines, both spatial and cultural. Formulated by poets of African descent, the creative language of dub poets was often conceptualized through the framework of identity politics and an anti-colonial approach. Yet from the 1980s, dub poetry became institutionalized simultaneously within the pop culture industry and in “respectable” venues such as academic research, a process that calls its initial political orientation into question. In light of its differentiated formations, audiences, mediating devices, and forms of reception, however, we might view and evaluate dub poetry not exclusively through the prism of political speech, but also as a cultural form. Based on texts, recordings and performance analysis this article is a call to acknowledge dub poetry, and artistic expression in general, as the result of aesthetic decisions rather than exclusively moral ones.

Keywords: blackness, Caribbean dub poetry, Jamaica, performance, race, reggae.

Introduction

This article deals with a quite familiar effect: artists renowned for their social and political commentary are expected, by their colleagues, critics, fans and patrons, to sustain their protesting image and make it a constant feature in their work. Hence, many authors and performers find themselves torn between such extra-artistic expectations and their own desire for self-expression. A famous example is the Jamaican-American poet Claude McKay, who in 1926, during the Harlem Renaissance, wrote to his friend, the Afro-American intellectual Alain LeRoy Locke, the following lines:

“I am afraid I must tell you frankly of the Afro American judges, I am afraid of their influence. Although I have strong social opinions I cannot mix up art and racial propaganda. I must write what I feel, what I know, what I think, what I have seen, what is true, and your Afro American intelligentsia won’t like it” (McKay 1926: 2).

McKay, once a communist party member who spent time in Russia, is correctly remembered as a political artist. In his own view, however, the political dimension can be only infused through one’s personal prism rather than at its expense. The alleged tension between personal and socio-political commentary often reveals itself in

the work of black writers, and I will address it in this article through the case of dub poetry. In this regard, I will show that what appeared to many as a conflict of interests was not perceived as such by the poets themselves.

Dub poetry is a genre of performance poetry that originated in the Caribbean in the 1970s. It is affiliated artistically with reggae music and associated with socio-political ideas. With the growing popularity of reggae throughout the world, dub poets enjoyed significant attention during the 1980s. However, although the circle of practitioners in this genre increased steadily, academic discourse on dub poetry has waned since the late 1990s. This has to do with the routinization and dissemination of the genre but, as I will show, it is also related to the perceived devaluation of political enthusiasm on the poets' part.

The case of dub poetry indicates a rather typical approach in the study of popular music, and black music in particular, which seeks political commentary within artistic expression and tends to evaluate the artists along these lines (Hall, Jefferson 2006; Kofsky 1970). Straddling the line between two cultural and artistic fields, dub poets are allegedly confronted with a double threat of co-optation, from the popular music industry and from institutions affiliated with "serious" poetry. Hence, the tendency to evaluate dub poetry mainly in political terms leaves poets only a narrow leeway for expression and leads almost inevitably to disappointment. Below I will offer an alternative perspective according to which social and political positioning among artists should be understood primarily as an aesthetic decision rather than as a moral one. My claim is that the expression of political ideas, although a central component of dub poetry, is not the poets' prime motivation.

From the start dub poetry was accompanied by reggae music and was distributed in recorded form before being published in print. Therefore dub poetry can be seen as just another sub-genre of reggae. Its socio-political orientation is also typical of reggae music and is often characterized by Afrocentric and anticolonial messages. Against this background it is easy to see why there are so many who tend to perceive dub poetry mainly as a political project. On the other hand, leading poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean "Binta" Breeze, Mutabaruka and Benjamin Zephaniah repeatedly defined themselves merely as poets not confined to rigid artistic categories (Morris 1997). Due to this apparent estrangement from the style to which they "belong", these poets were criticized for withdrawing from their initial social protest in an effort to be accepted by the cultural and academic elite (Habekost 1993). Thus the transition from dub poetry to "general" poetry encompasses the tensions between Afro- and Eurocentric traditions, between the empire and the colony, and between the "low" culture of popular music and the "high" culture of poetry.

But how are we to understand the essence of dub poetry without slipping into arbitrary judgment of its social and artistic values? Since dub poetry juxtaposes poetic and musical elements, it is probably expected that some texts are read better than others as poems, while some remain closer to popular songs. For example, critic Mervyn Morris noted with reference to poet Yasus Afari that his poetry is not interesting enough in terms of language, especially when the element of performance is removed (see Mordecai 1994: 67). Instead of focusing on artistic evaluation (e.g.

“interesting”) my argument aims to explore the meaning of written lyrics within the sum of artistic components. In this vein the poems/songs discussed throughout the paper were chosen for their reflexive character, i.e. for the element of self-examination embedded in them. The subject matter of these songs, to put it in a different way, is the very nature of dub poetry, including the conflicts mentioned therein. It is also no coincidence that most of the quoted poets are popular performers, as their products represent the issues under discussion more clearly.

Dub poetry

In his introspective poem *Dis Poetry* Benjamin Zephaniah depicts dub poetry as a “verbal riddim” that is “designed *fe rantin*” (read: for ranting) (benjaminzephaniah.com 2017). To better understand this coupling of lyrics and rhythm typical of dub poetry, a short historical description is in order. During the 1970s Jamaican music industry produced no LPs but only 7-inch records that featured a single song. The B-side of the record was then used by creative producers like Lee “Scratch” Perry and King Tubby to rework the original track and turn it into an instrumental track known as a “dub version”. In the typical process of creating a dub version the lyrics and harmonious instrumentation were dropped, leaving an amplified repetitive bass line and percussion in front. Later different sound effects like echo and reverb were added alongside supplementary voice and sound samples.

These new instrumental versions opened the way for a new kind of performer called a “toaster”¹. Unlike singers, toasters did not demonstrate singing skills but rather the ability to improvise original texts over the rhythm (riddim). Originally these improvisations were not made to be recorded, but to serve as a basis for live events, and they were changed and updated skillfully according to circumstances and place. Practically toasters offered an economic setup that brought live performances to outlying and rural areas; over the recorded riddims, and as an integral part of the party atmosphere, they often related during performances to actual and current events.

In reference to the early toasters, Johnson wrote that “the dub lyricist is the DJ turned poet” (1976: 398). However, in spite of their shared cultural orientation, toasters differ from dub poets as much as they differ from singers. Moreover, since their performances aimed mainly to support festive events, their texts depended more on the musical element and were based heavily on vocals (screams, calls and moans) rather than on lyrics. Dub poet performances, on the other hand, are a first step in freeing the written text from musical accompaniment and thus from its functional dimension on the dance floor.

Emphasis on the spoken or written word indeed enables dub poets to perform their songs with no musical background. At the same time, however, dub poets strive to maintain the musical feel by the way a poem is written and read. Oku Onuora, a

¹ Toaster is one of the terms affiliated with the function of master of ceremonies and refers to performers who are not singers and whose performances are characterized by improvisation. Similar terms are disc jockey and rapper, who appeared in different places and different social contexts.

dub poetry pioneer, explained that “when a poem is read without any reggae rhythm backing [...] one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem” (see Morris 1997: 66). Thus dub poets operate on the line between singers and poets and accordingly may perform in either night clubs or poetry clubs, as well as in parks, stadiums, classrooms and cultural centers. When they perform alongside popular singers, as happen many times in reggae festivals, their performance attracts greater attention from the crowd to lyrical content. Generally speaking they are more attuned to social and political subjects compared to “regular” singers. In this respect the notion of dub acquires another meaning, as Onuora explains: “the aim and purpose of what I’m doing is to dub *out* the unconsciousness out of people head, and to dub *een* consciousness” (see Habekost 1993: 4).

The use of spoken language to address political issues has not always characterized Caribbean poetry. R. J. Owens claimed that in the first half of the 20th century Caribbean poets were still heavily influenced by British traditions and therefore produced “fake rather than genuine poetry” (1961: 120). This claim refers to the issue of creativity and lingual originality within colonial order. In this regard scholars divide the history of Caribbean poetry into three periods (Chang 2001). In the early 20th century poetry was written by a small circle of Elizabethan intellectuals who tried to assimilate into the British elite and who adopted its language mainly for flowery depictions of local landscapes. The second period began in the 1940s and was influenced by nationalistic ideologies that became more prevalent throughout the Caribbean, and by class tensions within its societies. Although the poets’ attention had now turned from bourgeoisie salons to poor urban neighborhoods and rural spaces their language often remain artificial and strange to their depicted views. The third period, which began in the 1960s, was characterized by a more accurate expression of the social reality in the islands from the point of view of the local population and in their language. This new poetry acknowledged local idioms, like the Jamaican patois, as a legitimate language form that defines social belonging and national consciousness (Cooper 1995).

The history of Caribbean poetry then is a process of transition from estrangement to involvement and from false reflection to sincere testimony, through both subjects and language (Chamberlin 1993: 244). Dub poetry as an artistic endeavor, including its distinctive fusion of poetry and reggae music, should be understood within this historic context. As a musical genre, reggae merged Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American styles; the gospel of civil rights carried by American music was blended in Jamaica with Afrocentric and anticolonial sentiments that gave explicit expression to what was only hinted at in standard poetry. The Jamaican Rastafari movement, a religious sect that mixed revivalist elements and Garveyist Black nationalism, was the main and most explicit voice of this approach. Although reggae was never designated exclusively to social protest, Rastafarian ideas and language came to the fore in the late 1960s as more prominent reggae performers affiliated with the movement. This unique blend of Caribbean exotica, Black nationalism and resistance practices such as drug consumption rendered reggae as an attractive commodity for mass consumption throughout the world.

Few would deny that reggae's popularity contributed dramatically to dub poetry, but at the same time dub poetry's affiliation with popular music raised questions about its artistic value. Referring to the first printed anthology of dub poetry Victor Chang wrote:

"I merely want to suggest that we cannot often expect [dub poetry to have] any subtlety of approach, anything that is inward-looking, musing, quiet, reflective, tender, delicate, registering a complexity of position or feeling" (see Morris 1997: 67).

On the other hand, if dub poetry's major achievement was to create a sort of "authentic voice" (I will renounce this idea below), and to bring poetry to the masses, then printing and sealing it in books seemed like a reversal of its own artistic endeavor. As prominent dub poets now defy this very definition and tend to describe themselves simply as poets, questions are raised with regard to the political commitment that supposedly distinguished the genre.²

Language

"I ent have no gun
I ent have no knife
But mugging the Queen's English
Is the story of my life"
(“Listen Mr Oxford don”, see Agard 1991: 44).

By the mid-20th century, R. J. Owens claimed, the Caribbean had not yet produced its own Mark Twain – a writer whose language was equally native *and* poetic – and therefore its poetry and literature remained “minor and bastard” (Owens 1961: 127). Beyond simple literary criticism, this derogatory terminology points to the apparent essence of what Paul Gilroy called the Black Atlantic, implying a socio-cultural category constructed within Western civilization and yet excluded by it. Elaborating on W. E. B. Du Bois' seminal study developed in 1903, Gilroy concludes that the life of black people in the Western hemisphere entails a fundamental experience of “double conscious” (1993). Following the same line Stuart Hall (1993) claims that living as a black in Europe or America, i.e. being black *and* Western, promotes identity politics based on a logic of coupling, one that undermines the sense of exclusivity rooted in the logic of binary oppositions. Black people's subjectivity, explained Hall (1997), is comprised of what he calls three coexisting “modes of presence”: the African mode – which refers to the silenced traditions that managed to endure; the European mode – which refers to the forced acculturation imposed on black people; and the American mode – which refers to the spatial dimension in which this fatal confrontation took place.

The multi-layered identity characteristic of the black Atlantic is evident in Mutabaruka's “Dis Poem”. In a way “Dis Poem” stands for the generalized story of

² Dub poetry, although a distinct genre, is not made of one fiber. Since this article does not aim to develop a comprehensive survey of the different styles and voices in dub poetry, I refer the interested reader to Jenny Sharpe (2003), Susan Gingell (2005), Ashley Dawson (2006). Christian Habekost's *Verbal Riddim* (1993) is still essential as an introduction to the field.

all blacks, or in Mutabaruka's words "his-story, her-story, our-story, the story still untold". Although it is configured in accordance with European literary tradition the poem acknowledges its African heritage; it begins with the "wretched sea/that washed ships to these shores" and with "mothers cryin' for their young/swallowed up by the sea". It then "call names like lumumba kenyatta nkrumah/Hannibal, akenaton, malcolm, garvey/Haile selassie", and finally presents itself as a drum: "Yes dis poem is a drum/Ashanti, mau mau, ibo, yoruba, nyahbingi warriors/ Uhuru uhuru". At the same time, however, Mutabaruka reminds his readers and listeners that Africa is but one source of inspiration among many others chosen by or enforced on the black subject. He writes: "dis poem was copied from the bible/Playboy magazine, the N.Y. times, readers digest/the C.I.A. files, the K.G.B. files/dis poem is no secret" (lyricsfreak.com 2017). In short, as Hall suggested, dub poetry as a distinct form of black expression fuses the collective memory of slave ships, American pop culture, bible stories, and the mundane work of colonial administration.

As such, dub poetry perhaps has no other fate than to express itself in that language which R. J. Owens called "bastard". However, I find R. J. Owens' conception problematic in two senses. First, it falsely upholds the existence of "pure" cultural forms, and second, it seems to perceive Creole languages as merely the defective morphing of Standard English. Opposing this perception, evolutionary linguistics based on persuasive empirical data informs us that the endurance of certain African speech elements (sometimes called "substratum influences") is a fundamental condition in the process in which English was acquired throughout the Caribbean (Alleyne 1989; Devonish 2002; Lewis 1979; Winford 1994). These scholars thus refuse to perceive the concept of Black culture as a mere mixture of different cultural components, calling instead to acknowledge the significant input of culture of Africa, referring particularly to the West African region as a distinguished cultural zone. The existence of a Creole continuum within Caribbean societies, i.e. a range of dialects stretched between "bush talk" and educated standards, is widely accepted by most scholars, but they nonetheless understand it in different ways. David Decamp (1971), for example, did not perceive Creole and Standard English as different linguistic systems but rather as a continuous spectrum of speech varieties. On the other hand other scholars perceived Standard English and Creole as distinguished and coexisting systems. Donald Winford, for example, stresses that although the Creole continuum does constitute a unified speech community it does not mean "that all varieties in the continuum are part of a unitary grammatical system, nor that there are no discontinuities between Creole and the official language" (1994: 46). Following the same line Mervyn C. Alleyne concluded that the empirically-documented presence of African continuity in Jamaican Patois not only refutes the view of Creole languages simply as "broken English" but also explains why "it is important to understand the process of language change rather than simply try to classify contemporary forms as genetically or structurally (typologically) related to one or another of the contributory languages" (1989: 134).

The theoreticians quoted above are not blind of course to the actual social contexts that influence, conditions, and govern the evolution of language change through ti-

me. Moreover, they stress that evolutionary processes are multidirectional and that they constitute different linguistic configurations associated with different settings within a specific society. For example, Alleyne (1989) suggests poems and folkloric tales became a realm in which native languages were continually practiced independently of the process that took part in other social settings (see also Lewis 1979: 108). Consequently, Alleyne explains, later generations of African descendants are found reciting, in a ritualistic manner, texts they do not understand. This point is rather important to the argument presented in this paper, since Alleyne's suggestion that "songs and folktales differ from the major channel of communication, which is in speech" (1989: 123) is relevant not only in the case of traditional texts but also in that of new ones. Thus, because they enable a dynamic that is different from everyday speech, certain kinds of poetry may be open for intensive innovations just as other poetic forms may serve for cultural preservation. Hence, while keeping in mind the scholarship presented above my case study leads me to emphasize those poems whose sense of broken English is rather reflexive and intentional, as John Agard's words explicitly state (1991). It is also important to remember that prominent poets like Johnson, Zephaniah and Lillian Allen are living far from the Caribbean, that is, within other speech communities, and therefore their applied Jamaican Patois cannot be seen as natural choice but rather as what Winford called "acts of identity" (1994: 53).

Traditionally, Black culture was conveyed through different modes of performance founded on oral rather than written texts. This trend became significant under the strict supervision of slave masters and provided black people with an "enhanced mode of communication beyond the petty power of words" (Gilroy 1993: 76). Thus, from the outset black culture was associated with what Gilroy called the "politics of transfiguration", one that replaced explicit communication with alternative modes that existed "on a lower frequency where it is played, danced and acted, as well as sung and sung about" (1993: 37). Johnson's *Bass Culture* nicely captures this very metaphor of culture maintained on a lower level; in this poem Johnson also translates the physical experience of music into written text, writing: "it is di beat of di heart/this pulsing of blood/that is a bubblin bass" (2006: 14). The motif of low-level in this song is further emphasized by its musical production; it is a typical dub version that features a deep repetitive bass line and a steady emphasis on the third beat of the 4/4 bar, which renders a sense of dropping into a rhythmic center of mass (a "one drop" rhythm). Johnson's non-expressive recitation – one that leads to no climax – usefully reflects the metaphor of a "bubblin' bass" and the routine on-going physiological movement of pulsing blood. Novelist Toni Morrison also explains her effort to retain the (black) musical experience in writing:

"The power of the word is not music, but in terms of aesthetics, the music is the mirror that gives me necessary clarity. [...] I have wanted always to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black. [...] I don't imitate [black music], but I am informed by it" (see Gilroy 1993: 78).

For literature and poetry there is no alternative to using words, despite their limitations and the historical burdens they convey. But apart from its inevitable confines,

language provides the writer with a powerful tool. “It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master”, wrote the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, “and it was in his (mis)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled” (see Chamberlin 1993: 67). Indeed, since the 1950s the task of Caribbean poets was to create a new language by utilizing the pre-contaminated words that were previously used to depict, report, educate, govern and entertain in the colonial order. As mentioned earlier the language of poetry itself, and not only its preferred subjects, became a tool that captured the rhythms and sounds typical to the place. More than any other style, dub poetry rests on the “low” street language and delivers this language to its printed version.

One may say, then, that low language typical of dub poetry reverberates in everyday speech. Nevertheless it is not a mere representation of social reality but more a way to confront the “official” language imposed on ordinary people by institutions like the media and education. In this respect, dub poetry expresses its anti-colonial sentiments by using the tools provided by the colonial order to deconstruct it and to challenge its validity. Like scholarly post-colonial criticism dub poetry is also characterized by a set of invented notions that echo conventional ones, thereby questioning their presupposed authority to represent social reality. This approach is clearly reflected in Rastafarian speech called “dread talk”³. Similar to Jewish mysticism, Rastafarian philosophy teaches that when expressed words have an intrinsic power to impact the real world. For example, converting the English word “understand” to “overstand” replaces an inferior state (under) with a superior one and hints that real comprehension (overstanding) of reality can be achieved only by rejecting conventional patterns of discourse and thought (Pollard 1990).

Thus, what may be called authentic expression is not a matter of depiction but rather of reinvention of reality. The poets’ use of and play on words strives to “affirm the authority of their own imaginations in forms that express the immediacy of the world in which they live and the possibilities of liberation from its imperious demands” (Chamberlin 1993: 245). It also important to note, however, that in the mundane practice of marking borders and creating affiliations language is not only a floating signifier for rebellion but also a useful tool. Typical tourists in Jamaica, for example, even those who are trained listeners and readers of local texts, will soon realize how easily locals may switch their language into the local idiom that excludes them from the conversation. This ability provides the islanders with a momentary advantage in relationships that regularly places them in an inferior position. Dub poets strive to retain this advantage in their printed volumes; their use of local vocabulary and invented words levels what Carolyn Cooper calls “new and old illiterates” (1995: 13). While struggling with Caribbean poetry, Cooper explains, readers who are already literate in English are forced to temporarily surrender their privileged position and to “become the slow learners they often assume non-literate Jamaican speakers to

³ The term “dread” originally referred to the dreadful appearance and unruly behavior of the movement’s members. In order to challenge the European aesthetic code and to expose their affiliation with Africa, Rastafari people grow their hair into thick tangled locks called dreadlocks, which soon became their sole signifier.

be” (1995: 13). Thus “strange writing”, as poet Bongo Jerry once called it, conveys the message of resistance through both content and form.

We may conclude by saying that politics is immanent in dub poetry and we cannot imagine it without this dimension. As Chang noted, dub poetry is “a poetry of protest and loud rhetoric. It is poetry meant to be shouted to an audience already charged up with emotion” (2001: 246). On the other hand we may also wonder whether politics is the *purpose* of this poetry. If the sense of resistance is embedded in forms, i.e. by the way content is cast in poetic structure and rearticulated as poetry, then the subject we deal with is aesthetic and the decisions made are figurative rather than semantic. Dub poets’ language is “strange” not because it rejects appropriate patterns of discourse but because poetry itself is strange to everyday speech. This is what grants any kind of poetry its unique essence, “plain as life and convincing as art” (Chamberlin 1993: 225).

Performance, recording, printing

Although song-delivery often includes strong performance elements, dub poetry’s focus remains on the performed text. For example, Zephaniah’s poem “Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death” (golyr.de 2000–2017) became popular due to Zephaniah’s vibrant performance of the described scene during which he jumps on stage, sending kicks and punches all over, and waving his dreadlocks in the air. As much as it calls attention to itself, Zephaniah’s performance still aims to emphasize the song’s lyrical content. In this particular case the song is delivered without musical accompaniment, which could convert lyrical content into musical, and accelerate it. By omitting the musical component the poet-performer becomes the sole focus of the happening; his voice is the only sound heard therefore the poem’s significance rests on the narrative despite the dramatic performance.

Johnson’s poem “Sonny’s Lettah” (poetryarchive.com 2005–2016) is another first-person testimony of police brutality against black person, in this case the narrator’s brother. Contrary to Zephaniah’s expressive performance, Johnson’s testimony is given from a detached position and emphasizes the distance between the narrator and the described protagonist. The poem tells the story of two brothers stopped by the police for vagrancy. When a policeman attacks the younger brother for resisting arrest, the older brother Sonny tries to help out but unintentionally kills the policeman.⁴ Sitting in his prison cell Sonny writes to his mother in Jamaica and tells her about the event. Johnson delivers his poem monotonously in an informative manner; the series of blows suffered by his protagonist is recounted almost bureaucratically. Throughout the performance Johnson remains static and his monotonous vocal delivery stands in sharp contrast to the dreadful episode he describes. If Zephaniah’s performance reflects emotional involvement, Johnson’s remoteness reflects the apathy of a man

⁴ The law against vagrancy was legislated in Britain in the early 19th century but was practically abandoned in the 20th century. Following waves of migration from the former colonies the law was reinforced in the 1950s and brought an unproportional increase in rate of black adolescent delinquency.

whose status of murderer was forced upon him by a distorted reality of injustice. In both cases the performers illuminate the plot, albeit in very different ways.

Recordings encode poems differently than do performances, turning them into finalized products that might be taken as the definitive version. This is even more so in cases where the performer no longer performs. Jamaican poet Mikey Smith, for example, made only one record before his death. Many believe that its musical accompaniment, arranged by Dennis Bovell who regularly works with Johnson, did not do justice to Smith's songs. As Habekost writes:

“If it was not for his unique poetic power and characteristic recitative style, the originality of Michael Smith's style would have been entirely veiled by the LKJ-styled music and production. The verbal artistry of Michael Smith, many people felt, demanded a different, indigenously Jamaican musical backing” (1993: 101).

As hinted by Habekost, musical arrangements are supposed to illuminate texts and not to overshadow them. Perhaps this is why all dub poets choose to perform some of their poems a capella the first place, like the examples of “Dis Poem” by Mutabaruka (lyricsfreak.com 2017) and “Dis Poetry” by Zephaniah (benjaminzephaniah.com 2017).

Printing poems takes them one step further away from the stage and from their performance, and raises the dilemma of how and to what extent musical elements should be maintained in the printed version. In his *Bass Culture* Johnson writes: “SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK!/What a beat!” (2006: 14). The use of capital letters and exclamation marks points the reader to the preferred way of reading, one that is executed in Johnson's own performance. Another example is Mutabaruka's transcription of “Dis Poem” (lyricsfreak.com 2017). It is a long poem made up of short lines chasing one another and often prefixed by “Dis Poem”. As it proceeds the internal rhythm seems to quicken and leaves readers with a sense of spin. The repeated use of “Dis Poem” has several meanings here. First, since the song is read a capella, the repeated template provides a sort of bass line over which all vocals and effects are added. The poet indeed utilizes his prefix as a platform that supports all the various elements and “effects” that went into the construction of the Black Atlantic: the enduring vitality of African heritage, symbolic influence of contemporary Africa in the modern age, the hardships of oppression and the presence of various white socialization agents. “Dis Poem”, thus, articulates the hybridized nature of the black subject while the repeated phrase expresses blacks' stubborn presence that is so distressing in whites' world.⁵ The accelerating spin that builds up throughout the poem is finally thrown into relief in its closing line with a fading echo effect that was also copied into the printed version of the poem.

Printed versions can preserve the vocal expression of performances only partially. This realization is perhaps echoed in Zephaniah's lines: “Dis poetry is not afraid of going ina book/Still dis poetry needs ears fe hear and eyes fe hav a look” (ben-

⁵ Mutabaruka makes this point explicit when chanting: “dis poem is messin up your brains/makin you want to stop listenin to dis poem/but you shall not stop listenin to dis poem u need to know what will be said next in dis poem” (lyricsfreak.com 2017).

jaminzephaniah.com 2017). It is interesting that the above lines were written by a poet whose book list is longer than his record list. At the end of the 1980s Zephaniah rejected an offer of tenure by University of Oxford and has since earned honorary degrees from several academic institutions. It is no wonder, then, that Zephaniah's poetry is "not afraid of going in a book" (jaminzephaniah.com 2017), but this does not mean that the printed versions of his work constitute a definitive standard. In his performances Zephaniah feels free to deviate from the printed version and to say, for example: "Dis poetry *is not* the kind that gets into books" (jaminzephaniah.com 2017). Nevertheless, one must acknowledge printed or recorded versions as a sort of final product, a default reference for anyone who has not seen or heard the live performances. Instead of pointing to any of these forms as representing the original, we should rather acknowledge the idiosyncratic properties of each form and the different experiences they offer.

Politics of self-expression

"According to de experts
 I'm letting my side down,
 Not playing the generation game,
 It seems I am too unfrustrated.
 I have refused all counselling
 I have refused to appear on daytime television
 On night-time documentaries,
 I'm not longing and yearning.
 I don't have an identity crisis".

...

"I am not a half poet shivering in the cold
 Waiting for a culture shock to warm my long lost drum rhythm,
 I am here and now, I am all that Britain is about
 I am happening as we speak,
 Honestly,
 I don't have an identity crisis"
 ("Knowing Me", see Zephaniah 2001: 44).

This part of Zephaniah's more recent poem presents the poet in a calm and self-confident position. He seems not to accept and perhaps even not to understand the necessity to express an identity complex or to protest against the conditions that could have caused it. Zephaniah obviously realizes the implications of migration, discrimination and racism and his poetry consistently deals with all these issues. At the same time he insists on stating in his song that "I don't need an identity crisis to be oppressed" (Zephaniah 2001: 44). This approach is rather different from the socio-political enthusiasm that has captured people's attention since the 1970s. Those who were attracted by dub poetry mainly for its protest affect may doubt the value of poetry that allegedly withdraws from such a goal. In this vein critic Stewart Brown writes:

“As dub poetry becomes a commercial product, as its performers like Benjamin Zepphaniah [sic] or Mutabaruka or Ras Levi Tafari become media stars and strive to entertain a mass, multicultural audience, there seems to me to be a real danger that the protest, the anger, the fire, becomes an act, while the image, the dub/rant/chant/dance becomes the real substance of the performance” (see Cooper 1995: 71).

These words are helpful due to the explicit and sincere manner in which they are articulated. What the critic is afraid of most is that the aesthetic aspects of dub poetry will emerge at the expense of its protest value. Moreover, the writer warns that even when expressions of protest are heard, they are only heard as part of an “act”. It is interesting to note that sometimes the poets themselves tend to adopt the line of criticism aimed at them. Mutabaruka, for example, wrote in his “Revolutionary Poets” that:

“Revolutionary poets
‘ave become entertainers
Babbling out angry words
... Yes, Revolutionary poets
‘ave all gone to the creative art centre
To watch
The sufferin
Of the people being dram-at-ized by the
Oppressors
in their
revolutionary
poems”

(“Revolutionary Poets”, see Mutabaruka 1980: 56).

This early 1979 poem already referred to the alleged threat set by mechanisms of popular music and by the elite’s art centers. It suggests that poets may become entertainers catering either to mass audiences or to the oppressive upper class. It is therefore easy to understand the poet’s dilemma as he attempts to protect his artistic integrity; on the one hand he is blamed for his apparent political indifference while on the other hand his protest poems are condemned for being “acts” of entertainment.

The drawback of such criticism, as anthropologist Marshall Sahlins noted (1999), is that it tends to evaluate cultural forms according to their political effect while ignoring their idiosyncratic properties. This criticism also errs in proposing that protest (or in fact any other idea) can exist independently of its forms of expression. We should bear in mind that in the arts expression is a goal in itself. Hence for poets and authors language is not a means to express extra-literary articulation but a material open to innovative use. Once again it is worth quoting Morrison:

“[...] I thought that if [my writing] was truly black literature it would not be black because I was, it would not even be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together – the sentences, the structure, texture and tone – so that anyone who read it would realise” (see Gilroy 1993: 78).

As we can understand, literary works maintain complex relations with the socio-political conditions that surround it; it may respond to them or be inspired by them, but these responses too will necessarily be processed artistically in terms of creative expression. That is why it would be a grave error to evaluate poetry as a mere political, social or racial manifesto. As Eva Illouz (2003) pointed out, politicians, unlike artists, use language in a referential way; even in the contemporary era of “post-truth politics” candidates (and their campaign directors) must take a clear stand on reality and clarify how they intend to address it practically. Literary texts, on the other hand – as Morrison’s reflexive comment nicely demonstrated, refer to reality indirectly and symbolically; more often than not they are self-consciously and deliberately ambiguous, ironic, reflexive, self-contradictory and paradoxical (Illouz 2003: 211, see also Dorchin 2017: 150–151).

Conclusions

Caribbean poetry emerged as a protest against cultural subjugation and a call for self-expression and self-representation. Alas, in a course of two decades protest-oriented poetry seems to have become a new rigid standard against which other artistic expressions are now gauged and criticized. But the mutual relation of text, music and performance is a question of neither artistic value nor political commitment; the question poets grapple with is not which subjects are appropriate for poetry but *how* to introduce a given subject into poetry. The decisions they make in this regard derive in part from the social reality in which they live and may teach us something about it. Still, poetry always conveys a tone we may regard as personal. In other words, the credibility of the poetic voice is “equally a product of its local authenticity and its literary authority, the words those of a West Indian and a poet” (Chamberlin 1993: 245). This brings us back to McKay whose letter suggests, just like the poems cited here, that even when socio-political situations stimulate artistic expression poetry-writing remains a purpose in and of itself. In this context we may recall a famous maxim, attributed to William Butler Yeats, that poetry is not made of man’s struggle with his surroundings but of his struggle with himself. Only in this way can we understand why a poem as an artistic artifact may preserve its value long after the conditions in which it was originally shaped have gone.

Acknowledgement

I’d like to thank Ras Guil Bonstein, whose passion for Jamaican music is a constant inspiration. This article is in memory of my teacher Prof. Michael Saltman, a distinguished scholar of African and Caribbean cultures.

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IEŠKANT KŪRYBINĖS IŠRAIŠKOS: RASĖS, POLITIKOS IR LITERATŪROS DIALEKTIKA KARIBŲ *DUB* ŽANRO POEZIJOJE

Uri DORCHIN

Santrauka

Straipsnyje tyrinėjama *dub* žanro poezija kaip meninė forma, vyraujanti ties kai kuriais paribiais – tiek erdviniais, tiek kultūriniais. Formuluota Afrikos nuosmukio laikotarpio poetų, kūrybinė *dub* žanro poetų kalba politikos ir anticolonijinių požiūriais dažnai buvo konceptualizuojama ieškant tapatumo. Nuo XX a. 9-ojo dešimtmečio *dub* poezija tapo institucionalizuota tiek popkultūros industrijoje, tiek „gerbiamose“ srityse, tokiose kaip akademiniai tyrimai – tai procesas, kvestionuojantis savąją vidinę politinę orientaciją. Šio proceso diferencijuotą formacijų, auditorijų, medijuojančių priemonių ir priėmimo formų fone vis dėlto galima į *dub* poeziją žvelgti ir ją vertinti ne išimtinai per politinės kalbos prizmę, bet ir kaip kultūrinę formą. Pagrįstas tekstų, įrašų ir performansų analize, šis straipsnis – tai kvietimas pripažinti *dub* poeziją ir meninę išraišką apskritai ne tiek kaip išskirtinai moralinių, kiek estetinių sprendimų rezultata.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: juodumas, Karibų *dub* žanro poezija, Jamaika, performansas, rasė, regis.