2008

Moqapi Selassie: Dub poetry in Birmingham

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Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol30/iss2/13

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Abstract
There is a tradition of underground performance poetry in England which thrives and survives well apart from the big publishing houses and which relies mainly on performance for its survival. Indeed poets like Levi Tafari in Liverpool perform regularly, but do not publish much. This may be due to a certain reluctance on the part of publishers to publish their work, because black performance poetry is by its very nature a poetry of the moment, destined to be heard at a certain occasion, a celebratory event or a social gathering.
Moqapi Selassie: Dub Poetry in Birmingham

There is a tradition of underground performance poetry in England which thrives and survives well apart from the big publishing houses and which relies mainly on performance for its survival. Indeed poets like Levi Tafari in Liverpool perform regularly, but do not publish much. This may be due to a certain reluctance on the part of publishers to publish their work, because black performance poetry is by its very nature a poetry of the moment, destined to be heard at a certain occasion, a celebratory event or a social gathering.

Black performance poetry today in Britain has its roots in dub poetry. The words ‘dub poetry’ refer to a type of oral poetry which developed in Jamaica and in England in the 1970s thanks to the work of poets like Mutabaruka (Alan Hope), Orlando Wong (Okuonuora) and Linton Kwesi Johnson. In an interview granted to the critic Mervyn Morris in 1979 Okuonuora defined a dub poem as ‘a poem that has a built-in reggae rhythm — hence when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm (so to speak) backing, one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem’ (qtd in Brown 51–54).

The development of dub poetry has already been well documented elsewhere, but a few important points should be made. First of all, dub poetry was an offshoot of the radical spirit of the 1970s and answered the need of a community, both in Jamaica and in England, which felt cut off from the academic world and society at large. Dub poets portrayed themselves as the spokespersons of the oppressed or the ‘voice of the people’ and their poems focused on issues like the colonial legacy, race relations, the difficult living conditions in Jamaica’s working-class areas (known as ‘ghettoes’) and all forms of oppression more generally.

In Jamaica, the dub poet Okuonuora began to write poetry while he was in jail for armed robbery, and his poems became so popular that he was allowed out of jail to perform them at the Tom Redcam library. Eventually, Okuonuora was released on parole in September 1977 and his first collection, Echo, was published shortly afterwards (Habekost 20). In 1979 and 1981 respectively, he released two records, Reflection in Red and Wat a Situashan, on which he performed his poems to the accompaniment of reggae music. These dub poems dealt with the harsh reality of poverty and violence in Kingston’s ghettoes and contributed to establishing dub poetry as a genre of protest poetry.

Similar experiments with sound and music had been carried out in England by the Black British poet Linton Kwesi Johnson who was born in Jamaica in 1952 and arrived in England in 1961. Johnson’s first collection of poems, Voices of the Living and the Dead, was published in 1974. Two collections followed, Dread
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*Beat an’ Blood* (1975) and *Inglan Is a Bitch* (1980). Johnson also recorded a number of reggae albums with Island Records and Virgin, and these recordings made him very popular with a young, multicultural audience which was probably more interested in reggae than in poetry.

In his poems Johnson dealt with the problems faced by the West Indian and Black British community in Britain and he quickly became the voice of Black Britain. His poems relied heavily on reggae rhythms and frequently featured binary structures and alliteration. He wrote about the living and working conditions of the Black British communities in poems like ‘Sonny’s Lettah’, (*Inglan is a Bitch*), ‘Inglan is a Bitch’ (*Inglan Is a Bitch*) and ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ (*Dread Beat and Blood*), but could also celebrate the power of reggae and its social role in poems like ‘Reggae Sounds’ (*Dread Beat and Blood*).

In the 1980s the dub poetry tradition was continued by a number of Black British oral poets who began to insist on the concept of the oral tradition and ancestral culture, and who tried to dissociate dub poetry from an over-reliance on reggae rhythm, because it was felt that such a dependence on Jamaican popular music had led to an impasse. The poet Jean Binta Breeze had even stated that she found the dub format too ‘restricting’: ‘I had to get out of the confines of dub poetry… It was so restricting having to write poetry to a one drop reggae rhythm. That can’t be good for any poet’ (qtd in Habekost, 45). So the new generation of dub poets tried to focus on the concepts of ancestral culture and on the communal aspect of oral art. These poets include Levi Tafari, Martin Glynn, Benjamin Zephaniah, and more recently Moqapi Selassie and Kokumo (Gerald Dixon).

In 1986 Levi Tafari and his friend Eugene Lange founded the ‘African Griot Poetry Workshop’ and toured local schools and community centres. The first part of the workshop consisted of a presentation on the oral tradition and the role of the griot in Africa. The second part of the workshop consisted of a performance of Tafari’s and Lange’s poems to illustrate ‘the live experience that is the only way to appreciate the “human element” that is so vital to the Griot tradition’ (Habekost 78).

In ‘De Tongue’, Tafari claims that the poet’s role is to ‘inspire de youths’ and to ‘project de truth’ and that the tongue is ‘de first instrument’. Tafari clearly sees the poet as a teacher, an educator and this didactic function of art lies at the heart of the new conception of dub poetry. This view appears clearly in ‘De Word’:

```markdown
Wi use de word
fe express a feelin
Wi use de word
fe give life a new meaning
Wi use de word
inna de oral style
Wi use de word
yes all de while
[…]
Wi use de word
fe fight oppression
```
Wi use de word
Fe teach a lesson (Tafari 21).

From a formal point of view this poem is based on the call and response pattern which underpins many Caribbean work-songs and which consists of a short refrain called by the leader and improvised lines sung by the group.

In ‘Duboetry’, Tafari says that his brand of poetry (called ‘duboetry’ to distinguish it from ‘dub poetry’) is to be placed in the context of the Last Poets’ ‘jazzoetry’ thus making clear its long pedigree:

Inna de Sixties
Wi heard jazzoetry
From de LAST POETS
Black revolutionaries
They chanted for
Their Liberty (Tafari 24)

The poet also observes that duboetry ‘nuh inna dictionary’ and that ‘its inna different category’. This new poetry belongs to the same tradition as dub poetry but is another branch of the same tree. The new dub poets like Tafari and Zephaniah are aware of a long tradition of black oral poetry and in his poem ‘Rapid Rapping’ Zephaniah mentions Linton Kwesi Johnson, Martin Glynn, Lioness, Levi Tafari, Mutabaruka, Okuonuora, John Agard and Grace Nichols. The new dub poets often name other poets to insist on the fact their art is to be placed in its proper cultural context and is not to be assessed or judged by standards associated with what they consider as ‘traditional’ poetry or poetry for the page. So they insist on the oral and revolutionary nature of their art, associated with dub. In ‘Rapid Rapping’, Zephaniah summarises this characteristic of griot poetry:

Long time agu before the book existed
Poetry was oral an not playing mystic
Poetry was something dat people understood
Poetry was living in every neighbourhood
Storytelling was compelling listening, an entertaining
Done without de ego trip an nu special training
Found in many forms it was de oral tradition
When governments said quiet, poets said no submission. (Zephaniah 39)

Dub poetry is represented in Birmingham by Moqapi Selassie, a performance poet of Jamaican parentage who was born in England and who has been writing and performing in the UK for many years now. He belongs to the Black British generation, the children of Jamaican immigrants who settled down in the UK in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. In his teens Selassie became attracted to the reggae and Rastafarian subculture which had taken Britain by storm in the 1970s following the success of bands like Bob Marley and the Wailers, Third World, Culture and the Gladiators. In the early 1980s Black Uhuru came on the scene and made a very big impression with songs like ‘Abortion’, ‘Plastic Smile’ and ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner’. They quickly became Selassie’s favourite band.
Selassie also became a member of the Ethiopian World Federation, a Rastafarian organisation which had been responsible for the repatriation of Rastafarians to Ethiopia. He also joined a sound system called Goodwill International and learnt how to play the akete drum.

Over the years Selassie has established quite a reputation as a dub poet or a performance poet. He is mainly known as a performer but his poetry also works effectively on the printed page. His poetry includes a public, protest or celebratory side which remains quite constant, and a more private side which complements the public side. His poetry is steeped in the Caribbean oral tradition and is characterised by a degree of intertextuality with reggae culture. For instance, the poem entitled ‘Respeck Due’ is a tribute to the late Louise Bennett, aka Miss Lou, the ‘godmother’ of performance poetry in the Caribbean, and it playfully alludes to several famous reggae songs (including a reference to Sergeant Brown, a figure who appears in Lovindeer’s ‘What the Police Can Do’, a track released in the 1980s) to draw the audience:

Is who mi ah taak bout?
Mi ah taak bout Miss Lou
Mi nah taak bout
Mosquito One
Mosquito Two
Is who mi ah taak bout?
Mi ah taak bout Miss Lou
Mi nah taak bout
Sargeant Brown
Or de one bwoy blue
Is who mi ah taak bout?
Mi ah taak bout Miss Lou
Mi nah taak bout
Lou lou skip tuh mi lou
Is who mi ah taak bout?
Mi ah taak bout Miss Lou
Mi nah taak bout a stalk ah sensimilla
By Black Uhuru
Mi ah taak bout Miss Lou. (Doumerc 2006a 75)

In performance, Selassie chants the verses by himself and is joined by the audience for the ‘Miss Lou’ chorus (‘I’m talking about Miss Lou’). The poem works as a manifesto for oral poetry as it is a tribute to a well-known Caribbean poet who wrote in dialect, but it also embodies the Caribbean oral tradition without relying on the reggae rhythms or social themes which characterised dub poetry in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The same pattern recurs in another poem by Selassie entitled ‘Confidence’. Selassie always performs this poem at the beginning of his ‘readings’: it is his signature poem. ‘Confidence’ relies on the alternation between verses chanted by the poet and a chorus shouted by the audience:
An important aspect of Selassie’s poetry is its commentary on local or international events, sometimes simply voicing the concerns of his community. This communal aspect of his poetry brings to mind the role of the oral poet or griot in African societies. A griot is a travelling, itinerant musician and poet/storyteller from West Africa or Senegambia. In *Rap Attack*, David Toop quotes an excerpt...
from *Savannah Syncopators* in which the art of the griot is summed up: ‘though he has to know many traditional songs without error, he must also have the ability to extemporise on current events, chance incidents and the passing scene. His wit can be devastating and his knowledge of local history formidable’ (Toop 32). In his article entitled ‘Dub Poetry: Selling Out’, Stewart Brown defined the role of the griot in the West African tradition:

Put at its simplest, the central tradition of West African oral poetry was the praise song, a poem of celebration or protest, made by griots whose function within their societies included observing, commenting on and voicing the concerns/conditions of the people. They were licensed, as it were, to make the complaints of the people heard in the courts of power. And whether or not the griots were taken notice of, the fact that the voice of popular discontent was articulated, that there was a mechanism by which it could be heard, diffused a lot of tensions within the society. (Brown 52)

Such is the effect of Selassie’s poem entitled ‘Concrete Jungle’ which takes the listener/reader on a ‘tour’ of Birmingham seen through Black British eyes. The audience/reader is not given the usual tourist-brochure description of Birmingham as a modern success story of the industrial revolution, but an ‘other’ picture:

Rule Britannia
Britannia rules
Di waves
Dem tek InI
Black people
Here innah Inglan
Fi wuk wi as slave
Again?

Natty Dread
wi livin
innah concrete jungle
Natty Dread
wi livin
innah concrete jungle

‘igh rise ghettoes
houses in di skies
no one cyan tell I
dat dis is paradise
mi get up in di marnin
wot ah bam bam
guh fi ketch a lif
di lif outtah hackshan
di way dem bill deze
playsiz
its like a pris’n

Coz Natty
Handsworth
Aston
Ladywood
Edgbaston
Kings Heath
Balsall Heath
Sparkbrook
Small Heath
Evvryweh I man guh
All I see is concrete
Cummek wi step it
Uppah freeman street

Coz Natty 
(Selassie, unpublished poem)

An important aspect of this type of poetry is naming, as the poet refers to well-known areas which are inner-city areas and which are a far cry from the popular city-centre haunts and restaurants. The poet appears as a chronicler of the underdog, an ‘alternative newscaster’ in the Linton Kwesi Johnson or Benjamin Zephaniah mode. This poem is also characterised by some reggae intertextuality as it is reminiscent of the Black British reggae group Aswad’s song ‘African Children’. In this reggae number Aswad sang about the children of Caribbean immigrants living in some kind of concrete jungle with nowhere to play.

‘Concrete Jungle’ also works through its reference to a famous Bob Marley tune that depicted a hellish environment and a life without hope, but it also evokes ‘Natty Dread’ in its evocation of a deprived urban environment. So songs in the heavy roots reggae tradition seem to have provided the template for this poem. Wit is also present as the first stanza includes an ironic reference to the patriotic tune ‘Rule Britannia’ with its chorus ‘Britons never, never shall be slaves’. In the poem, Britons ‘tek I and I/Black people/Fi wuk as slave’. ‘Concrete Jungle’ also brings to mind ‘I and I Alone’ by the late Mikey Smith, a piece that places the persona in the middle of an urban inferno he does not understand and in which he feels isolated.

Topicality is essential to the art of the dub poet, and Selassie’s work reflects this feature of performance poetry. For instance, one of his recent poems, entitled ‘Dey Doan Care’, takes to task George W. Bush’s administration in the wake of the disaster wrought by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The poem presents the persona as an average person sitting in his living room, watching the news on television, and being bombarded with ‘harrowing scenz’ involving black people and ‘rescue teams’. The poem lays the stress on some incongruities like the fact that ‘Bad bwoy Merika’ ‘cyan ‘elp/udder nayshanz/ by any means/but dem cyaan/ save dem ownah/peepul innah New Orleanz’. The American dream is denounced as a polite fiction in the light of the devastation in New Orleans and the poet contrasts ‘di policy/fi save an defend/di property’ with the apparent lack of respect for ‘hewmanity’ displayed by the ‘Nashanal Guard’ and its ‘sharpshootahz’. The refrain broadens the scope and makes its point through alliteration and repetition:

Dey doan care
For us at all
Dey doan c-a-a-r-e
Dey doan care
For us at all
Dey don’t
Dey don’t (4)

In this poem Selassie’s spelling system plays an important part, which means that the poem works on the printed page too. For instance, the American dream is referred to as ‘di Americon dream’, and the connotations of ‘con’ in this context cannot be escaped: America is presented as a conman who tricked immigrants and its own people into believing in ideals like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This interpretation is borne out by some lines about the poor, huddled masses that Emma Lazarus wrote about in the poem engraved at the foot of the Statue of Liberty: ‘corporate Amerika/doan give a damn/bout di dispossessed/di poor/downtrodden/and homeless’. The original lines by Emma Lazarus read: ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses [...] Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tossed to me!’. Another subtlety revealed by a closer reading of the poem concerns the use of (mis)spelling. Indeed it could be argued that Selassie’s spelling contributes to a defamiliarising effect which throws a negative light on the events related in the poem:

Now dis is di reality
Ah natral catastrophe
Mek it clear
Fi di ole wide werl fi see
Amerika’s racial parshality
Why wen di wite peepul
Took tings
Dey called dem survivahz
We, black peepul
Took tings dey called dem lootahz (4)

In this excerpt the way ‘Amerika’, ‘parshality’, ‘peepul’ and ‘lootahz’ are spelled, although faithfully transcribing a Jamaican pronunciation, also unsettles the non-Jamaican reader (and maybe the Jamaican reader too) and forces him or her to concentrate on these words in a new way. Selassie’s spelling signals a Jamaican voice, but also points out the fact that what is presented in this poem is not the conventional take on ‘reality’, but a different, alternative perspective.

Nevertheless Selassie’s poetry should not be seen as confined to ‘protest poetry’ or ‘slogan poetry’ as some of his poems reveal a more personal side. The poem entitled ‘My Dad’ is a case in point. This piece is autobiographical and belongs to a certain tradition in West Indian poetry which consists in writing about one’s ancestors or one’s parents and in seeing them as emblematic of a certain way of life. In this poem the figure of the father stands for the immigrant
experience in Britain when thousands of Jamaican people came to the Mother Country in order to rebuild the British economy while improving their material conditions. The poem is made up of series of monometers and dimeters, and deserves to be quoted at length in order for its effect to be grasped:

my dad
left Jahmaykah
innah di fifties
cummah Inglan
my dad
in di Baptis church
im woz a deacon
my dad
cum from Jahmaykah
Gibraltar St Annes
live ah Birmingham
innah Inglan
my dad
always use tuh seh
get ah good education,
yuh ‘ear son.
my dad
use tuh sing di loudis
innah church
my dad (Doumerc 2006a 73)

In the rest of the piece, the reader/audience learns that Moqapi’s father loved his ‘fry dumpling an oats porridge’, liked watching cricket and gardening, planting ‘onion, thyme, potato and tomato’. The catalogue of Jamaican characteristics may seem tedious, and may read like a sociological treatise, but in fact the effect produced by the poem’s terseness is quite the opposite: the reader feels as if he or she knows many people like this ‘dad’ and can thereby relate to the feelings displayed in this poem. Anyone can relate to this poem. Interestingly, when asked about the reason which led him to write such a poem, Selassie replied that he had tried to counter all the negative stereotypes associated with the dysfunctional black family in which the father is always absent and the mother has to do everything (Doumerc 2006b).

Selassie’s poetry stands as an example of modern dub poetry today in England and its links with the Caribbean oral tradition are quite obvious. His poetry includes a strong protest element but is not confined to that tradition, as it is also celebratory and joyful. Selassie’s poetry shares some obvious characteristics with traditional dub poetry, but it is also different from this type of dub poetry inasmuch as it does not rely on rigid reggae rhythms and tries to focus on themes like ancestral culture, the power of the oral tradition or family ties. It is a form of performance poetry which bears the influence of traditional dub poetry but also tries to move forward.
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