“Dis Poem Shall Call Names Names”: Naming in Reggae Culture, the Example of Dub Poetry

David Bousquet

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/5274>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.5274
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2013
Number of pages: 45-55
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

David Bousquet, “Dis Poem Shall Call Names Names”: Naming in Reggae Culture, the Example of Dub Poetry”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 36.1 | 2013, Online since 16 April 2021, connection on 22 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/5274> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5274>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“Dis Poem Shall Call Names Names”

Naming in Reggae Culture, the Example of Dub Poetry

The question of names and naming emerged as a crucial concern in the cultures of the African diaspora as a way to resist the anonymity and loss of identity imposed upon slaves. Through examples taken from reggae culture and the subgenre known as dub poetry, this paper looks at how names imply a political and poetic use of language in black Atlantic cultures.

This is what I call cultural identity. An identity on its guard, in which the relationship with the Other shapes the self without fixing it under an oppressive force. That is what we see everywhere in the world: each people wants to declare its own identity.

Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 169¹

The question of names and naming is a crucial concern in the cultures of the African diaspora. As the opening words by Glissant suggest, for slaves whose African identity was utterly lost during the Middle Passage, recovering a sense of identity for themselves – reclaiming a name and even more importantly the power to name themselves – was a necessary tool in their attempt to survive the colonial order. All across the black Atlantic,² the performative power of language to name people and things is invoked as an antidote to the anonymity forced upon slaves, particularly in the field of cultural production. Naming hinges on questions as diverse as generic labels, artists’ names, identity (de)formation, cultural autonomy or language theory. Reggae culture provides relevant examples of this phenomenon with its emphasis on ritualised, mystical performances in which language and music come together in an experience of collective empowerment that Rastas describe with the phrase “word sound have power.”

It is precisely on this belief in the poetic powers of language to “make” that the subgenre of reggae, generally acknowledged as dub poetry, relies. Dub poetry is written and performed by artists who are very intimately linked to the reggae tradition; their work is largely inspired by the work of reggae DJs but is also published as written texts, which is not the case for other reggae artists who operate within a predominantly oral tradition. In a famous “Note on ‘Dub Poetry,’” Mervyn Morris describes the genre thus:

“Dub poetry” which is written to be performed, incorporates a music beat, often a reggae beat. Often, but not always, the performance is done to the accompaniment of music, recorded or live. Dub poetry is usually, but not always, written in Jamaican language [...]. Most often it is politically focused, attacking oppression and injustice. (66)

The fact that many dub poets use stage names that are themselves poetic (re)creations, indicates their awareness of the centrality of the act of naming. The label “dub poetry”

1. “C’est cela que j’appelle identité culturelle. Une identité questionnante, où la relation à l’autre détermine l’autre sans le figer d’un poids tyrannique. C’est ce qu’on voit partout au monde : chacun veut se nommer soi-même.”

2. This expression is borrowed from the title of Gilroy’s well-known book. The word “black” is used without a capital to give preference to a de-essentialised reading of the concept in keeping with Gilroy’s own use of the term.

is also contested,³ as is the case for many other cultural productions from the black Atlantic which constantly evade any straightforward categorisation. These ongoing controversies illustrate the tension inherent in the act of naming between a legitimate desire for recognition of specific identities, and a tendency to categorise these identities abstractly, thereby disconnecting them from the material conditions of production which give them life and meaning.

Names and Naming in the African Diaspora

Naming is an act of power and this statement is cogently illustrated in the history of Caribbean societies and cultures. Indeed, at the time of slavery, the first thing the masters did on the arrival of their African slaves was to give them new, Christian names. This symbolic gesture was part of a wider strategy of systematic eradication of all traces of African cultures among the slaves, aimed at weakening any attempt on their part to resist the authority of the master. Thus, slave masters did everything they could to prevent the slaves from speaking their original languages, practising their original religions and beliefs, and preserving their original cultures. This practice of renaming can then be perceived as the symbol of the ultimate loss of identity for the slaves, of their utter dispossession of any form of cultural autonomy, to use a concept defined by Édouard Glissant (*Caribbean Discourse* 12-95). In other words, the anonymity of slaves, the loss of their name and thus of their identity, was an indication of their sub-human status in the plantation economy.⁴

Over the course of almost five hundred years of colonialism and post- or neo-colonialism, slaves and their descendants have, in many ways, tried to resist this utter deprivation of autonomous cultural expression. Unsurprisingly, one of the first ways to do this was to rename themselves with African names, given the great symbolic weight of the act of naming as a marker of identity. Probably the best known example of this reappropriation of identity through renaming is that of Malcolm X, who explained in his autobiography: “The Muslim’s ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that [Mr Muhammad] never could know. For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears” (229).

These words can be read as a paradigm for practices of renaming in the African diaspora for which reggae culture provides significant examples. Many reggae artists – DJs, singers, musicians – use African names, like Daweh Congo, Jah Mali, Matumbi, Jah Shaka or Sizzla Kalonji. Many reggae band names also incorporate an African element like Black Uhuru or Aswad.⁵ The influence of the Afrocentric Rastafari doctrine on many reggae artists can account for the omnipresence of Africa as a historical and cultural reference in Jamaican popular music.⁶ Be they of African origin or not, most reggae artists use stage names which can be seen as a form of resistance to the anonymity and loss of identity imposed on slaves through a creative and poetic use of language.

3. See Breiner; Cooper; Donnell and Welsh.

4. For more information on the history of Creole cultures and societies see Brathwaite; Gilroy; Glissant *Caribbean Discourse*; McFarlane; Segal.

5. The word “uhuru” means “freedom” in Swahili, “aswad” means “black” in Arabic.

6. See Barrett; Campbell; Zips.

Another typical device is to use names or titles which indicate the “royal” origin of slaves, symbolically performing a return to African roots by inverting social and political hierarchies, especially in the context of the British Empire. The disempowered slaves are returned to their “original” status as African kings and queens by receiving a new name. Thus, titles like “General,” “Prince,” or “King” have become commonly used by artists too as is the case for Duke Reid, General Degree, General Levy, Prince Jammy (who later became King Jammy when he took over from King Tubby), Prezident (sic) Brown or Prince Far I. Similar names are used by female artists like Queen Ifrica or Princess Black. These titles have even become common language for many Rastas who call each other “Emperor” or “Empress.”

By renaming their slaves, the white masters symbolically effected a deprivation of agency and identity which is at the heart of the colonial project and was carried out in much more violent ways in other domains. Conversely, when former slaves or descendants of slaves rename themselves, they also reclaim symbolically a form of agency, that is, the capacity to act and think by themselves and for themselves; in other words, renaming is a form of empowerment which lies at the core of reggae culture.⁷ This is particularly visible in the names of the most famous sound systems.⁸ Quite often, the name of a sound system is chosen to evoke its power, both in terms of the decibels it is able to produce and in terms of the significance of its cultural productions. Here are a few examples: Aces International, Boss Sounds, Conquering Lion,⁹ Imperial Youth, Invaders High Power, King Jammy’s Super Power, Majestic Hifi, Ruddys The Supreme, Sovereign, Tom the Great Sebastian, Warrior King.

The way artists re-name themselves is also linked to questions of authorship and copyright in the context of the Jamaican music industry, as this passage from Benjamin Zephaniah’s “The Approved School of Reggae” reveals, also emphasising the political dimension of “owning your name” and the struggle of slaves to make a name for themselves:

The black woman/man
Don’t own their music
Don’t own their image
Some of we don’t even own we name
The innovators
The creators
Wanna burn record company HQ down
But they need the money. (81)

7. In many cultures emerging from the context of slavery, empowerment is crucial to fight the lasting effects of the dispossession imposed on slaves (Fanon; Glissant *Caribbean Discourse*). Through various strategies, slaves try to invert political and social hierarchies by reclaiming agency and power, at least on a symbolic level. Musical performances in particular offer a time and space where a form of power can be experienced for both performers and audiences, as is evident in reggae sound systems but also in Gospel masses or hip hop parties.

8. In reggae culture, sound systems are more than simple sets of machines; they have a central role in broadcasting reggae music in specific ways: “Outdoor dances [...] evolved from merely one more form of urban entertainment into the hub around which Kingston’s various inner cities turned. For the crowds that flocked to wherever the big beat boomed out, it was a lively dating agency, a fashion show, an information exchange, a street status parade ground, a political forum, a centre for commerce, and, once the deejays began to chat on the mic about more than their sound systems, their records, their women or their selves, it was the ghetto’s newspaper” (Bradley 5). For more information on the importance of sound systems in Jamaican popular music, see Barrow and Dalton; Bradley; Stolzoff.

9. This name is one of the attributes of Haile Selassie, the central figure of the Rasta cult, whose full title reads: “His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God.”

In the Jamaican music industry, there is no such thing as intellectual property and the concept of authorship is particularly problematic. As Zephaniah's lines demonstrate, intense battles are fought over questions of ownership, and there is in reggae music a general tendency to resist the way music is produced and sold by the international/North American pop music industry:

Authorship and ownership of compositions were often unclear, and in any case were generally unimportant to musicians, most of whom had little knowledge of copyright, could not envision earning royalties, and hence made records primarily for prestige, pocket money, and future opportunities. (Manuel and Marshall 463)¹⁰

On a more theoretical level, these practices of naming or renaming can be read as manifestations of a specific sense of identity in cultures of the African diaspora. Precisely because the slave masters virtually erased all traces of the African origins of the slaves, the only available material through which slaves could forge a sense of identity was the masters' culture imported from Europe. Thus, the slaves' African roots were never accessible directly, they had to re-invent, re-imagine or re-create their lost African identity through the medium of European languages and European cultural material.

Édouard Glissant describes this phenomenon as what he calls "the thought of trace" or "thinking from traces," a process in which identity is defined through endless, ever-renewed "diversions and reversions."¹¹ In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define identity-making in Caribbean languages and literatures as a process of "abrogation and appropriation," (38-77) while David Dabydeen uses the terms "de/reconstruction" (125). The words displacement and replacement are also particularly apt to describe the history of Creole cultures as they recall the concepts of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy emphasises the idea that black identity is not experienced in a simplistic, essentialist way but is better defined as a process of identification which takes place during musical performances (102); he also defines identity in the African diaspora as "a *changing* rather than unchanging same" (101). To Glissant, identity in the Creole context should be seen as a relation, being oneself immediately entails being related to others, a phenomenon he finds in utter contradiction with dominant Western discourses on identity. This is what he calls a relational or rhizomic identity,¹² explicitly borrowing the model established by Deleuze and Guattari.¹³

With this conceptual framework in mind, it becomes apparent that the names of artists bear traces of the historical conflicts which constituted them: the European, imported names are not completely rejected; they remain present to some degree, so that the names are a mixture of European and African cultures. In that sense, names truly encapsulate and symbolise the history of the African diaspora and Creole cultures. This reconstruction of names is also an indication of the fluidity and movement which characterise cultures of the black Atlantic: renaming oneself is an ongoing, ever-renewed process which never reaches completion. The fact that artists use several names

10. For a more detailed discussion of authorship in reggae culture see Collins (75) and Saunders (110-1).

11. Respectively "pensée de la trace" (*Poétique du divers* 16-7) and "détours et retours" (*Discours antillais* 40).

12. "Identité relation" or "identité rhizome" (*Poétique du divers* 30-1).

13. In the (post)-colonial, globalised world, these views on culture and identity and their unfixed nature are certainly not limited to black cultures and we could, without overlooking the details of each historical situation, extend them to other cultural contexts as Clifford, among others, has shown.

and nicknames can be interpreted as a sign that their identity is constantly changing and cannot be ascribed a single, univocal meaning.¹⁴ Like Creole cultures themselves, names and identities in the African diaspora are always hybrid constructs.¹⁵

Dub Poetry

Many famous dub poets have also forged their stage names in this way. It is the case for LKJ, originally born Linton Johnson, who uses the Ghanaian middle name “Kwesi” or “Kwasi” meaning “born on a Sunday” (which is actually the case for Johnson). Jean Breeze adopted the West African middle name “Binta” meaning “with or close to God.” Mutabaruka, originally Allan Hope, adopted a more radical stance by using only an African name meaning “one who is always victorious” in the Kinyarwanda language of Rwanda. The title of this paper is taken from one of Mutabaruka’s most famous pieces entitled “Dis poem.” This line – “dis poem shall call names names” – can be read in several ways. On the studio recording of Mutabaruka’s performance, his diction pauses between the two occurrences of the word “names,” creating an effect of emphasis. On paper however, the line break seems to suggest that the poem will “call names names,” indicating simultaneously that it will reveal a historical truth that has been hidden for a long time and that this revelation will be received as an insult by some.¹⁶ The question of names is raised at an early stage in the poem:

dis poem shall call names names
like lumumba kenyatta nkrumah
hannibal akenaton malcolm garvey
haile selassie (52)

The first three names are those of important historical figures involved in the African anticolonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, namely Patrice Lumumba in The Republic of the Congo, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana. Significantly, these three names refer to the history of former British colonies: the rebellion of the Mau Mau which ultimately led to Kenya’s independence in the 1950s was of particular importance to independence movements in Jamaica; the pictures of the African rebels published by the British press had a tremendous impact on the Jamaican public and Rastas in particular.¹⁷ Then the poem moves on to names of ancient figures that are simultaneously acknowledged historical leaders and mythically charged characters in the African diaspora: the Carthaginian commander Hannibal and the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton.¹⁸ Further on, the names of Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, two of

14. It is very common for reggae artists to use several names and nicknames. Bob Marley for example is referred to alternatively as Bob, Breda Bob, Robert Nesta Marley, Mister Marley or Tuff Gong. Similarly, Peter Tosh was known as The Bush Doctor or The Stepping Razor, and Winston Rodney is called The Burning Spear or Doctor Rodney.

15. “My point here is that the unashamedly hybrid character of these black Atlantic cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal” (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 99).

16. The last reading is corroborated by other passages in the poem like “dis poem was copied from the bible your prayer book / playboy magazine the n.y. times readers digest” or “dis poem shall be called borin stupid senseless / dis poem is watchin u tryin to make sense from dis poem / dis poem is messin up your brains / makin u want to stop listening to dis poem.”

17. The famous dreadlocks are partly inspired from the Mau Mau rebels who refused to cut their hair and beards until they gained victory over the British rulers (Campbell 95-6).

18. Akhenaton in particular is an important figure of the African diaspora, and Egypt occupies a central symbolic space as is evidenced by the contested work of Cheikh Anta Diop. Egypt was also an important reference point for black Atlantic artists like Sun Ra.

the most important black nationalist leaders of the twentieth century, are mentioned.¹⁹ The list concludes with the reference to Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia who ruled the only African country never to have been colonised by any European power. Due partly to his symbolic dimension as direct descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Selassie also became the central figure of the Rastafari cult in Jamaica.

The way these names are employed in the poem suggests a certain proximity or even familiarity of the poet and the poem's audience with the great figures of the African diaspora. As Gilroy suggests, black Atlantic cultures are not best described as fixed entities. Rather, they are complex networks of echoes and reverberations between Africa and African slaves in the New World, between a glorified ancient past and a present dispossession, between historical truth and poetic fiction.²⁰ Similar effects are achieved in another passage of the poem:

dis poem is knives bombs guns blood fire
blazin for freedom
yes dis poem is a drum
ashanti mau mau ibo yoruba nyahbingi warriors
uhuru uhuru
uhuru namibia
uhuru soweto
uhuru afrika (52)

The use of the word "uhuru" emphasises once again the empowering dimension of the act of naming: the recovery of African names is an emancipating gesture through which the African heritage can be maintained and transmitted. The Mau Mau, Ibo, and Yoruba are all ethnic groups of West Africa, and these names refer also to their respective languages. Here, there is a move towards a pan-African project of unification and liberation which exceeds the political and geographical boundaries of the African continent including as it does the Nyahbingi warriors of Jamaica²¹ with African ethnic groups. The way names are used in this poem illustrates very well the endless process of diversion and reversion which characterises the African diaspora and a Creole sense of identity, or, to use Gilroy's phrase, the "roots and routes" of reggae culture constantly moving between Africa, Europe and America, between historical fact and poetic fiction, between a glorious past and a disenfranchised present.

Research conducted on the work of other dub poets suggests their use of names is generally consistent with what we have observed in the poems of Mutabaruka. A common tendency of all dub poets is to mention the names of famous reggae artists in their compositions. In "Five Nites of Bleedin"²² for instance, Linton Kwesi Johnson dwells on five musical events which shaped the history and consciousness of black British communities, namely four reggae parties and a James Brown concert. Typically,

19. Notably, Marcus Garvey, who founded and led the largest organisation of African American people in the history of the US (the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League), was born and raised in Jamaica.

20. "With a few noble exceptions, critical accounts of the dynamics of black subordination and resistance have been doggedly monocultural, national and ethnocentric. This impoverishes modern black cultural history because the transnational structures which brought the black Atlantic world into being have themselves developed and now articulate its myriad forms into a system of global communications constituted by flows" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 80).

21. "Nyahbingi" is one of the names Rastas give themselves, it also refers to a specific style of percussion music which is generally acknowledged as the foundation for Jamaican popular music of the second half of the twentieth century.

22. All the poems by Johnson quoted in this paper are taken from his Penguin anthology *My Revalueshanary Fren*.

the names of important British reggae sound systems are linked to the power of the musical experience they create:

soprano B sound system
 was a beating out a rhythm with a fire
 coming down his reggae-reggae wire
 it was a soun shaking down your spinal column
 a bad music tearing up your flesh
 [...]

 soun coming down neville king’s music iron
 the rhythm jus bubbling an back-firing
 raging and rising [...] (6-7)

Quite similar effects are at stake in “Sound Rap” by Martin Glynn:

An de D.J. talk
 an de man D. Brown
 a put de rhydm down,
 wid an Ire backing
 from Robbie an Sly,
 wha a mek de drum
 an de bassline cry,
 wid de man Yellowman
 jus a mek di dance ram,
 wid de man Brigadier
 who a talk Gods plan
 handin over to de man
 call Scientist,
 whose mixin skill
 should not be missed (68)²³

These poems, among others, constitute a response to the anonymity of slave status and represent a poetic practice which extends to the work of contemporary reggae artists as we have seen in the first part of this paper. As the extract of Zephaniah’s “The Approved School of Reggae” quoted above suggests, identifying the artists and musicians who helped build and popularise reggae music is a crucial concern for artists themselves but also for a number of researchers and musical analysts who try to establish the genealogy of Jamaican popular music. Nevertheless, for historical reasons, it remains hard to fix these names definitively: the desire to identify and celebrate the names of major artists is always already counterbalanced by the fluidity and anonymity which characterise Creole cultures. Thus, in the two passages from “Five Nites of Bleedin,” names given to sound systems and artists are quite misleading: “soprano B” is pronounced “sofrano B” on the audio recording while the “official” name seems to be “Soferno B,” and “neville king” sound system is also referred to as “King Neville.” In the poem by Martin Glynn, the poet plays on his audience’s familiarity with the names he mentions (like Mutabaruka in “Dis poem”) and rarely employs the full or most common names for these artists, preferring nicknames or parts of the full names: “D. Brown” most probably refers to Dennis Brown, “Robbie and Sly” are usually referred to as Sly and

23. The word “Ire” more generally spelt “Irie,” refers to a state of happiness or joy created by the sound system experience; the expression to “make di dance ram” or “ram di dance” refers to the ability of the DJs and sound system operators to make the audience feel “Irie” and express their joy loudly.

Robbie, and “Brigadier” is a reference to Brigadier Jerry, one of the most famous reggae DJs of the 1980s.²⁴

If mentioning the names of famous or less famous artists is a way for dub poets to acknowledge their proximity to the reggae tradition, they also situate their work among various literary or poetic traditions. In “Rapid Rapping,” for example, Benjamin Zephaniah quotes the names of the major influences which led him to become a poet. Interestingly, he juxtaposes references to American rappers like Public Enemy or KRS 1 to a list of twelve artists he identifies as the pioneers of dub poetry as a literary and musical genre.²⁵ Johnson does almost exactly the same thing in one of his best-known poems ironically entitled “If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet.” His list of influences includes African poets (Chris Okigbo and Tchikaya U’tamsi), American poets (T. S. Eliot, Jayne Cortez and Amiri Baraka) and Caribbean poets (Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Martin Carter, Nicholas Guillen and Lorna Goodison). The poem is also preceded by a famous quote by Bongo Jerry: “mostofthestraighteningisinthetongue” (94). Significantly, in the Penguin edition of the poem, a little biographical information for each of these poets is given in footnotes in an effort to trace the genealogy of Creole literatures.

“Rapid Rapping” and “If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet” illustrate two dimensions of the problem of names and naming in black Atlantic cultures which have surfaced in the course of this paper. Firstly, names reflect the hybridity and diversity of the cultures of the African diaspora in general and reggae culture in particular. The juxtaposition of names is relevant in that the lists include poets from various geographical origins, socio-economic backgrounds, races and genders. But dub poets also put on the same level references taken from the literary tradition and names of popular musicians: dub poetry is itself a hybrid genre located at the intersection of literature and popular music, and it thus problematises the notion of the literary canon, exposing it as a historical and cultural construct.²⁶ The second dimension of the act of naming in these poems is its crystallizing of the tension between the hybridity and fluidity of black Atlantic cultures and the desire for recognition and legitimacy which would compensate for the effects of the dispossession of slaves and their eternal anonymity.

Mentioning the names of important black historical figures in politics and the arts is a way of establishing them as equivalent to their white counterparts who often occupy a more central space in dominant historical narratives. This attempt at rehabilitating the historical role of anonymous black figures involved in the struggles against racism constitutes an important part of Johnson’s poetic project as can be seen in “Liesense fi Kill” for example where Johnson enumerates a long list of British blacks arrested, molested or killed by the British police. In the Penguin edition, footnotes provide a short reminder of the circumstances under which each of these people was attacked. Interestingly, the names of the victims are set against those of people that Johnson identifies as responsible for such racist attacks.

24. The problem of identifying and actually naming important reggae artists is dealt with in Barrow and Dalton; Bradley; Stolzoff. These books provide useful resources and references on the history of reggae, but since this history is largely oral and most musicians were never credited for the work they did, researchers also have to rely more and more extensively on websites and on-line forums to find out the details of the involvement of various actors.

25. The names are the following: Linton Kwesi Johnson, Martin Glynn, Mikey Smith, Levi Tafari, Mutabaruka, Oku Onuora, John Agard, Grace Nichols, Maka-B, Merle Collins, Sister Netifa, and Lemn Sissay.

26. For an inspiring analysis of literary canonicity in “If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet” see McGill. Cooper also discusses similar questions.

Naming can thus be used as a tool in the struggle for racial equality as it relates to the way black cultures deal with issues of authorship and cultural legitimacy. But names can never be ascertained once and for all, just like the identity they symbolise and summarise. In the African diaspora, names are always changed and exchanged, spelt and misspelt²⁷: they bring about con/fusion just as much as they permit clarification and identification.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is necessary to reflect on how the problem of naming entails a specific use of language in general and not only of names. This is particularly evident in a poem like “Mabarak” by Bongo Jerry:

SILENCE BABEL TONGUES; recall and
recollect BLACK SPEECH.
Cramp all double meaning
an’ all that hiding behind language bar,
for that crossword speaking
when expressing feeling
is just English language contribution to increase confusion in
Babel-land tower –
delusion, name changing, word rearranging
ringing rings of roses, pocket full of poses:
‘SAR’ instead of ‘RAS’
left us in a situation
where education
mek plenty African afraid, ashamed, unable to choose
(and use)
BLACK POWA. (15-6)

The question of naming is not only linked to one’s own name: slaves had to find names not just for themselves but also for the world around them as well. As many studies of Creole languages have shown, the languages used by slaves, although based on European languages, were transformed to the point of becoming unrecognisable for the masters.²⁸ In “Mabarak,” the links between naming and power take on another dimension. Not only is the act of naming, giving a name to a human being or an object, a symbol of “real” power relationships that exist outside language, naming is also linked to the performative power of poetic language to “make” reality.

The way Rastas use language comes to mind here. “Rasta talk” recalls the definitions of cultural identity evoked above in that it constantly deconstructs and reconstructs language in a poetic, and political fashion: the use of the phrase “I n I” as the first person pronoun for example is a powerful reminder of the relational nature of identity

27. The question of spelling is a crucial one in cultures where the tension between orality and literacy is ubiquitous. As Brathwaite and Cooper, among others, have shown, the very medium of cultural production is a marker of cultural hierarchies: the orality of the culture of slaves was (and sometimes still is) seen as the symbol of their inferior nature and their inability to access the “higher” textual culture of the masters. Variations in spelling are sometimes interpreted as mistakes, but they in fact imply an entirely new approach to language which is sometimes called “neo-orality” (see Ashcroft *et al.* Cooper). Many examples in this paper show the fluidity of the spelling of names which is another indicator of the conflict between a desire to fix meaning and the inability to do so definitively in the context of neo-oral cultures.

28. See Allsopp; Ashcroft *et al.* Bickerton.

in Creole cultures.²⁹ Rastas also invoke poetic language during ritualised ceremonies of collective meditation called “grounations.” Both Bongo Jerry and Mutabaruka are Rastafarians and they most probably have experienced such gatherings where language and names in particular are used in a similar way as in their poems. It is worth repeating here that dub poets always put a premium on the performance of their poems and that their performance style is heavily influenced by the reggae/Rasta tradition.

Even in the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson, who is not a Rasta and whose work is much more concerned with secular and political issues, names are always linked to a form of performance and spirituality. It is the case of his elegies like “Reggae fi Peach” where the name of the deceased is invoked to celebrate his memory and to foster a sense of community amongst the victims of racist attacks. In “It Dread Inna Ingran” and “Man Free,” the names of black activists imprisoned by the British state are used in slogans demanding their liberation, echoing the album cover where Johnson is portrayed speaking his poetry in a megaphone in front of a police station between two police officers.³⁰

In all these poems, the question of naming is not simply alluded to on a thematic level; re-naming is what these poems do every time they are performed. In that respect, naming is linked to a form of spiritual power or empowerment, but also to a form of performance: it is because names are named in performance that they acquire the power to conjure up the presence of the people to whom they refer. Naming then appears as a fundamentally poetic gesture whereby language is used not only to refer to people or objects, but to re-create a sense of identity in each new context of performance. Just like identity, naming is always already an unfinished linguistic process which is at the same time eminently political and poetic. In the words of Derek Walcott:

Deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own, accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary, from Asia and from Africa, but to an ancestral, an ecstatic rhythm in the blood that cannot be subdued by slavery or indenture, while nouns are renamed and the given names of places accepted [...]. The original language dissolves from the exhaustion of distance like fog trying to cross an ocean, but this process of renaming, of finding new metaphors, is the same process that the poet faces every morning of his working day [...]. (506-7)

David BOUSQUET
University of Strasbourg

Works Cited

- ALLSOPP, Richard, ed. *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
 ASHCROFT, Bill, Gareth GRIFFITHS and Helen TIFFIN, eds. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1989.
 BARRETT, Leonard. *The Rastafarians: The Dreadlocks of Jamaica*. London: Heinemann, 1977.

29. For more examples of Rasta linguistic creations and analyses of Rasta talk, see Ashcroft *et al*, Pollard.

30. These two poems feature on the album *Dread Beat an' Blood*. “Man Free” is dedicated to Darcus Howe, former editor of *Race Today* and member of the British Black Panthers, two organisations in which Johnson was also involved. The poem has never been published as a written text, but the chorus can be transcribed as follows: “Darcus outta jail / Race Today cannot fail / Darcus outta jail / de people’s will mus’ prevail.” “It Dread inna Ingran” is dedicated to George Lindo, an otherwise unknown victim of British racist policies; the chorus of the poem reads: “dem frame-up George Lindo / up in Bradford Toun / but di Bradford Blacks / dem a rally roun” (25).

- BARROW, Steve, and Peter DALTON. *The Reggae Rough Guide*. London: Penguin, 1997.
- BICKERTON, Derek. “On the Nature of a Creole Continuum.” *Language* 49 (1973): 641-69.
- BRADLEY, Lloyd. *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King*. London: Penguin, 2000.
- BRATHWAITE, Edward Kamau. *Folk Cultures of the Slaves in Jamaica*. London: New Beacon, 1971.
- . *Roots*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993.
- BREINER, Laurence. *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- CAMPBELL, Horace. *Rasta and Resistance*. St John’s, Antigua: Hansib, 1985.
- CLIFFORD, James. *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.
- COLLINS, Loretta. “Raggamuffin Cultural Studies: X-Press Novels’ Yardies and Cop Killers Put Britain on Trial.” *Small Axe* 9 (March 2001): 70-96.
- COOPER, Carolyn. *Noises in the Blood – Orality, Gender and the ‘Vulgar’ Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1993.
- DABYDEEN, David. “On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today.” *Tibisiri*. Coventry: Dangaroo, 1989. 121-35.
- DELEUZE, Gilles, and Félix GUATTARI. *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L’anti-Oedipe*. Paris: Minuit, 1972.
- . *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille Plateaux*. Paris: Minuit, 1980.
- DIOP, Cheikh Anta. *Nations nègres et culture: de l’antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l’Afrique noire d’aujourd’hui*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1954.
- DONNELL, Alison, and Sarah LAWSON WELSH, eds. *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- FANON, Frantz. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil, 1962.
- GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- . “Roots and Routes: Black Identity as an Outernational Project.” *Racial and Ethnic Identity: Psychological Development and Creative Expression*. Ed. Herbert W. Harris, Howard C. Blue, and Ezra E. H. Griffith. London: Routledge, 1995. 15-30.
- GLISSANT, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1989. Trans. of *Le discours antillais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- . *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.
- GLYNN, Martin. “Sound Rap.” *De Ratchet a Talk*. London: Akira, 1985. Repr. in *Dub Poetry: 19 Poets From England and Jamaica*. Ed. Peter Habekost. Mannheim: Michael Schwinn, 1986. 66-9.
- JERRY, Bongo. “Mabarak.” *Savacou* 3-4 (1971): 13-6.
- JOHNSON, Linton Kwesi. *Dread Beat an’ Blood*. London: Virgin, 1978.
- . *My Renalveshanary Fren: Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Classics, 2002.
- MCFARLANE, Anthony. *The British in the Americas 1480-1815*. London: Longman, 1994.
- MCGILL, Robert. “Goon Poets of the Black Atlantic: Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Imagined Canon.” *Textual Practice* 17.3 (2003): 561-74.
- MANUEL, Peter, and Wayne MARSHALL. “The Riddim Method: Aesthetics, Practice, and Ownership in Jamaican Dancehall.” Special Issue on Dance, *Popular Music* 25.3 (October 2006): 447-70.
- MORRIS, Mervyn. “A Note on ‘Dub Poetry.’” *Wasafari* 26 (1997): 66-9.
- MUTABARUKA. “Dis poem.” *Jamaica Journal* 24.2 (1992): 52.
- . “Dis poem.” Audio recording. *The Ultimate Collection*. Isleworth: Greensleeves, 1996.
- POLLARD, Velma. “Social History of Dread Talk.” *Caribbean Quarterly* 28.4 (1982): 17-40.
- SAUNDERS, Patricia. “Is Not Everything Good to Eat, Good to Talk: Sexual Economy and Dancehall Music in the Global Marketplace.” *Small Axe* 13 (March 2003): 95-115.
- SEGAL, Ronald. *The Black Diaspora*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.
- X, Malcolm, and Alex HALEY. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove, 1965.
- STOLZOFF, Norman. *Wake The Town and Tell The People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- WALCOTT, Derek. “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory.” The Nobel Lecture, London: The Nobel Foundation, 1992. Repr. in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh. London: Routledge, 1996. 503-7.
- ZEPHANIAH, Benjamin. “Rapid Rapping.” *City Psalms*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992. 38-40.
- . “The Approved School of Reggae.” *Too Black, Too Strong*. Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2001. 80-1.
- ZIPS, Werner. *Rastafari: A Universal Philosophy in the Third Millenium*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2006.