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**Dr. SATAN'S ECHO CHAMBER:  
RAGGAE, TECHNOLOGY AND  
THE DIASPORA PROCESS**

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# Dr. SATAN'S ECHO CHAMBER: RAGGAE, TECHNOLOGY AND THE DIASPORA PROCESS<sup>1</sup>

Louis Chude-Sokei

## Author's Note.

At this point I'm proud to have forgotten how many times this essay has appeared. It was initially presented as the inaugural "Bob Marley Lecture" for the opening of the Institute of Caribbean Studies' Reggae Studies Unit at the University of the West Indies, in Kingston Jamaica in 1997 but has taken on a life of its own as many of its insights and declarations have been found to be continually valid as electronic music has grown and sound studies has itself become a formal discipline. I'm unable to read it now due to my personal history with the piece and its immediate responses, but it did serve as the primary inspiration for my more recent book, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Wesleyan University Press, 2015). It will also be the titular essay in a forthcoming collection, "*Dr. Satan's Echo Chamber and Other Essays*" also contracted with Wesleyan for publication in 2020. I'm incredibly pleased and honored that *Popular Inquiry* has seen fit to imbue it with continued life and relevance.

Louis Chude-Sokei. Boston, Massachusetts, 2018.

Let me humbly begin with the history of the Universe. Western science has provided us with a myth of origins in the "Big Bang" theory, which locates the beginning of all things in a primal explosion from which the stars, moons, planets, universes and even humanity are birthed. Because Western science's obsession with cause and effect has focused on the process of contraction and expansion in the universe (mirroring its colonial and neo/post-colonial conceits), it is the role of another kind of science to interrogate the metaphor in the term "big bang." In-

deed, the fact that “science” in the Jamaican vernacular is synonym for “bush magic” or the occult, allows me to ground these metaphysics in the folklore of the Caribbean. The accompanying fact that one of the great dub producers of the 1970s was called Scientist (Overton Brown) and that the great tech-gnostic innovator Lee “Scratch” Perry surrounded himself with occult mythology and paraphernalia can be no accident.

With this in mind, we can re-interpret (version) the “Big Bang.” It is a sound, which makes possible the universe and then the world. Creation is merely an echo of that primal sound, a product of its sonic waves. This myth establishes one of the most crucial dialectics in human knowledge: sound and silence. What bridges the two elements is echo, the traces of creation. If sound is birth and silence death, the echo trailing into infinity can only be the experience of life, the source of narrative and a pattern for history.

These scientific abstractions can be grounded in the Old Testament. The Jewish conception of Diaspora is in fact one that all investigations of Diaspora must inevitably engage. This is especially the case for us here because black new world religious traditions--from Vodun to Rastafari, from anti-colonial missionaries to the Civil Rights Movement in America--have been constructed by and in relation to the Jewish Diaspora as manifested in the Old Testament. This tradition leads us into a discussion of Reggae music and how its revolutionary uses of sound production technology, has given us in the black Diaspora a way to hear our metaphors of self, history, migration and national belonging. This music has helped us ground ourselves in communally created myths that sustain us in the protracted experience of dispersal. After all, Diaspora also means distance and the echo is also the product and signifier of space.

The Old Testament tells us that “in the beginning” God spoke. “Let there be light” and there was light. “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters” and there was a firmament in the midst of the waters. And so on. And so on. Jewish mysticism revises this myth by providing a subtle re-reading that brings it closer to the theory of the “Big Bang” and the cultural practices manifested in reggae music. According to this tradition it is the sound of the divine voice (the *aleph*), pregnant with possibilities but devoid of any specific meanings, that created all that is known and unknown. In short, they assert the Rastafari conception that “word-sound” has “power” indeed more power than the actual language, the actual lyric or the local intention. Sound becomes its own realm of meaning, of discourse, of politics where the word is necessarily tied to a cultural specificity that must always contend with its other, its sound. And a sound must in turn (especially in the context of mass-media, multi-national corporations and communications technology) struggle with the implications of its echoes and the cultural practices of those far enough away to make their own local meanings out of the echo before it decays and is swallowed by infinity.

My observations here depend on seeing (hearing) black musical forms--specifically reggae--in a way unique to our traditional, materialist discussions of sound and culture. It does seem that one of the legacies of colonial knowledge is that we who were once objects of that clinical gaze find it difficult to transcend it. Where Western anthropology and cultural criticism has seen black art as merely sociological, as evidence of either response or resistance, reggae discourse seems to also not take the music seriously beyond its capacity to describe the symptoms of national malaise (Jamaican scholar Brian Meeks' "hegemonic dissolution") or a rudimentary cultural critique ("the voice of the people" or "the rhythm of resistance"). In an attempt to break from these clichés, I will take reggae seriously in the way of African American classical music, seeing it through a fairly intricate (and hard won) critical apparatus of its own. By focusing less on the words and more on the sound, I hope to engage the music in terms also of aesthetics. So these observations are more suggestive than strictly analytic; they are historical, yet not history. For as Ralph Ellison says of early Jazz, I will say of reggae: with these cultural forms "we are yet not in the age of history, but linger in that of folklore."<sup>2</sup>

As we know, there is a strong tradition of thought that traces all black music to its sources in the secular/sacred tensions of religion. Such thinking links Christianity with pre-Christian spiritual concerns (for example, spirit and ancestor worship) and finds an interesting confluence between the two. It is through Christianity that heathen tendencies--religious heresy as well as political dissent--could take root and evolve in a relatively independent sphere. In reggae, the revivalist influence in ska and the music of Rastafari roots clearly manifested the implementation of sacred desire in secular music and media. But even after music bridges the sacred/secular divide--as in today's dancehall, r&b and hip hop--the impulses towards invoking cultural memory and participating in ritual behavior are still as strong as they were in the context of formal religion.

As E. Franklin Frazier argued years ago in his *The Negro Church in America*: "The masses of Negroes may increasingly criticize their church and their ministers, but they cannot escape from their heritage. They may develop a more secular outlook on life and complain that the church and the ministers are not sufficiently concerned with the problems of the Negro race, yet they find in their religious heritage an opportunity to satisfy their deepest emotional yearnings."<sup>3</sup> In short, the resources of cultural expression have been so formed by the dynamic between pre-Christian sensibilities and the revisionist politics of black Christianity, that black sound is never free of the trappings of faith, desire and memory.

An example of this "changing same" to use Amiri Baraka's description of the continuity of black musical aesthetics across time and space, can be seen in African American rhythm and blues which emerges out of black gospel music. This form materializes the deep, emotional

betrayal of American democracy in a discourse of love, heartbreak and sexual loss. Here the resources of gospel and the spirit explore a secular and sexual terrain. In Jamaican music we see perhaps a parallel development (an echo if you will) in the plaintive tones of "lovers rock" or in the reggae audience's well-known attraction for African American r&b. But a more powerful contemporary example of this transference can be seen in the allegories employed in dancehall music. The obsession with female sexuality in today's music mirrors the almost pornographic lust for "mother Africa" in the popularized negritude of roots reggae.

This in turn develops out of the slave's re-interpretation of the Old Testament, which was made to address a concern with black exile, homelessness, racial oppression and an overwhelming desire for a mother--or an other--land. From Africa as idealized mother, to woman--paraphrasing Carolyn Cooper--as an image of temptation: call it a cultural reflex, where despite the changing of material conditions and gender roles (or due to them), despite the difference of the object, the discursive structure remains the (changing) same. If you can accept this tradition of desire, faith and faithlessness (a tradition which has explicitly masculinized its longing to be sure and placed on the body of woman the legacy of the fall), then there is no difficulty in seeing in Jamaican "sound culture" the legacy of sacred (and sexual) ritual.

In Jamaican English a "sound" has meant many things simultaneously. In addition to the basic definition of the word, it means also a song, a style of music or a sound system. It is in the final definition that all of the different meanings find dynamic peace. To describe a "sound" via a sound system, is to define sound by way of what I would call a cultural apparatus--in this case, one that requires, deejays, selectors, engineers, producers, people who build up the sound and disseminate it through speakers or across record shop counters; and of course, people who follow, criticize and consume the product of that "sound." Sound in Jamaica means process, community, strategy and product. It functions as an aesthetic space within which the members of the national or transnational Jamaican community imagine themselves. This is an imagined community which, unlike the one mapped out by Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities*, operates not by the technologies of literacy, but through the cultural economy of sound and its technological apparatus which is distinctly oral.

This last element is crucial particularly because Jamaican music has always been radically populist and has rarely followed the avant-garde tendencies of some first-world popular music--except, perhaps, with the dub craze of the seventies which we must remember was a music that existed merely to showcase and explore analogue tape-delay echo and reverb, to in short foreground technology in the context of sound. It is ironic that a sound so "roots" as dub has become appropriated in the West as a radical statement of "third world" technological sophistication and post-modern de-centeredness. Ironic, yet not unique, for the history of the

reception of black music in the West is marked by the tension between black intentions (always mediated by innovative technological and stylistic gestures in the name of authenticity) and white interpretations (which are often willing to ignore technological innovation in the name of authenticity). Because dub is not what it speaks, but instead the architecture of machine spaces, its obsession with plenitude is lost to those who fetishize the merely technological.

But more on this later, for it is through "sound" and through an arcane form such as "dub" which fetishized what Osbourne Ruddock (King Tubby) called "the implements of sound" that Jamaica has made its lasting impact on the world of music, technology and the process of black cross-cultural interpretation that is the Diaspora. Reggae has only been a vehicle for the dissemination of larger ideas about sound, oral/aural knowledge and technological innovation. Sound systems as ritual space have laid the foundations for the various sound cultures in the West that exist as what Paul Gilroy calls an "alternative public sphere" for generations who seek communities in an age where national affiliations are relentlessly undermined and creatively redefined. This is a space that provides different symbols, a critique of the social structure and a more relevant spiritual sensibility for those hungry for meaning and identification. For many blacks in the Diaspora, sound may offer what "race" and "nation" offered a generation or two ago.

For a perspective on Caribbean sound and culture not limited by the harsh and often un-subtle nature of raw material analysis, we must turn to our literary heritage. "Race," sound and ancestral memory are connected in one of Caribbean literature's most well-known texts. The first section of George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile*, appropriately titled "In The Beginning," features a curious encounter with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by way of the BBC. He writes:

It is a tribal habit in certain reserves of the B.B.C. to pay for the resurrection of the Dead. The ritual is expensive; but it is an important part of contemporary culture. The result describes a need. It relaxes our hearing. It keeps us in touch with the past, and provides us with subjects for future conversation. Through the perfected necrophily of the living, we are allowed to tune in on the forgotten secrets of the Dead. The Dead are now honoured by their absence; preserved in our memories, summoned by engineers to inhabit the little magic box of sound. Prospero may have thrown away his Book; but the art of radio will rescue his weariness from despair; immortalise his absence; remind us that poetry is a way of listening. The art of radio may be too mortal for belief, but sound has its echoes whose future is eternal... It is enough to know that Tomorrow will not desert us; that Tomorrow cannot refuse our habitual waiting; for Prospero may have thrown away his Book; but the art of radio will rescue his voice from the purgatory of the Ocean which is and may always be a neighbour to eternity.<sup>4</sup>

This passage, inexhaustible with interpretive possibilities, makes a distinction between Prospero's book and the "little magic box of sound." For Lamming the book clearly represents the primary medium of colonialist knowledge where the radio with its eternal echoes, allows for African ancestors to be rescued from the "purgatory" of the Atlantic slave trade.

The radio, although Lamming barely suggests it, is a technology of orality. And to study the aesthetic and material properties of black sound-production is to study orality, migration, myth and cultural memory. This is what Marshall McLuhan, Ruth Finnegan and Walter Ong mean when they claim that modern mass media and popular culture are essentially oral technologies. And this is what African American writer/Jazz scholar Albert Murray means when he states "technology exists within the context of myth and ritual, not vice versa."<sup>5</sup> Even though in Lamming's theorizing (or mythologizing or versioning) it is Prospero's voice that is rescued by electronic mediation, radio functions as a way of open communication with whatever dead and reminds us most importantly that "poetry is a way of listening." For those descended from oral traditions and whose dependence on it is due also to the exclusive and racist structure of Western literacy, a sensitivity to sound must exist in a way that it does not for the children of Prospero. I would modify Lamming's phrase to remind us all that in the black Diaspora, "culture" is a way of listening.

Which brings me back to the cultural form of the Jamaican sound system. It arose partly in response to the BBC and its local versions, the RJR and the JBC, which catered primarily to the Jamaican elite and its colonial concerns and neo-colonial cultural apparatus. The Jamaican masses did not hear themselves in the narratives of pre-Independence radio, but heard instead the sound of colonial authority and the fawning insecurities of the elite classes. Lamming's Prospero had to contend with Calibans such as Sir Coxson and Duke Reid who "cursed" dominant media by the construction of an alternate space for popular entertainment and cultural discourse. It is no accident that sounds became dominant at the eve of Jamaican independence; and it is no historical accident that Jamaican rhythm and blues becomes ska just when Jamaica becomes other than colony--at least nominally.

In this context Edward Kamau Brathwaite describes ska as the "native sound at the yardway of the cultural revolution."<sup>6</sup> It is no mistake that the eternal echoes of ancestors like the Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey emerge in the music of this time when his name was still exiled from national memory. Brathwaite, like Lamming, is offering a hermeneutics of black sound, a way of listening that finds in sound meanings specific to the history of Jamaica and, by extension, the cross-cultural poetics of the black Diaspora--after all, it was black American rhythm and blues and New Orleans jazz that conditioned this "native sound." It was the echo-

ing of W.E.B. Du Bois's "voice of exile"—his characterization of black spirituals--that made it across the "purgatory of the Ocean" and was picked up and translated by Jamaican radio.

By now I hope the description of the black Diaspora as a process is clear and I hope that we can agree that sound is the primary technology structuring this cultural sprawl. It is akin to what Paul Gilroy has mapped out as a "Black Atlantic" network. But where such theorizing fetishizes what the anthropologist James Clifford would call a de-centered and lateral Diaspora and rejects the centrality of "Africa," I would through the constant evocation of the cultural practices of memory assert that "Africa" as both multivalent signifier and historical legacy is still central to black modernity whatever it may now mean—and wherever we now think "centers" are. It is true that the echoes of Africa that are new world black cultures have now bounced back creating a complex scenario that can best be grasped by the metaphor of an "echo chamber." Roots reggae in Kenya and hip hop/dub/techno in Shantytown South Africa; raggamuffin dancehall stylee in Ghana and turn-tables mixing with the Kora in Senegal: an echo chamber indeed, one that collapses space and time and where origins and reflections are indistinguishable but where difference is everywhere.

With and against the Black British Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" I will pose the words of the Jamaican British Stuart Hall:

Presence Africaine is the site of the repressed. Apparently silenced beyond memory by the power of the experience of slavery, Africa was, in fact, present everywhere: in the everyday life and customs of the slave quarters, in the languages and patois of the plantations, in names and words, often disconnected from their taxonomies, in the secret syntactical structures through which other languages were spoken, in the stories and tales told to children, in religious practices and beliefs in the spiritual life, the arts, crafts, musics and rhythms of slave and post-emancipation society. Africa, the signified which could not be represented directly in slavery, remained and remains the unspoken unspeakable "presence" in Caribbean culture. It is "hiding" behind every verbal inflection, every narrative twist of Caribbean cultural life. It is the secret code with which every Western text was "re-read". It is the ground-bass of every rhythm and bodily movement. This was--is--the "Africa" that "is alive and well in the diaspora."<sup>7</sup>

Africa—as imagined center around which echoes collect and from which they disperse--is central not only because it is the "secret code" and the "ground bass" (this latter being an important metaphor for reggae) but also because it is where the de-centered and lateral economies of black Diaspora culture inevitably end up! Again, it is no mistake that the fastest growing market for reggae music is on the continent itself. And it is no accident that continen-



tal reggae producers and West African sound systems are beginning to engage with Diaspora by way of a sound that has always asserted its island origins simultaneously with an African pedigree and by way of an African American influence. Yet this is not inauthentic or unique. Reggae became reggae precisely at the moment when it managed to mask its hybridity. Of course the assertion that the products of new world blackness "end up" on the continent is only partially serious. In the context of Diaspora's cross-cultural logic (a logic which depends on global communications technology and contemporary modes of travel), nothing ever "ends up" anywhere; instead echoes merely ricochet off of each source and off of each other. And as we know, sound waves when not captured by a receiver head off into space and follow the still reverberating after-effects of the "big bang."

But historicizing the echo requires a more material tracing. Here is a more solid example of sound production as ritual and cultural memory in the context of black migration. The history of how rhythm and blues gets to Jamaica is well known: through radio broadcasts and migrant laborers like Clement Dodd who bring the sound of the African American urban experience to the colonized island. In this we see the subtle translation of one black discourse of identity, politics and faith into another all in the soundworld of pre-Independence Jamaica. What is less well known is the material process of the re-translation (an echo of an echo) that occurs when fully formed Jamaican sound culture encounters a post-civil rights African American urban generation. This is a generation searching for a new sense of community after the optimism of the Civil Rights movement is incarcerated, exiled and assassinated. Black American urban culture in the early 1970s when Clive Campbell (DJ Kool Herc) established his sound system in the Bronx, was slipping into a spiritual vacuum which was too a product of the declining influence of the central institution for the Civil Rights Movement which was the black church.

It is important to stress that this process or re-translation occurs not through reggae music, not through broadcasting, but the actual translation/trans-plantation of the technologies and rituals of Jamaican sound system culture. Thus far history and anecdote have seen fit to trace the influence of reggae on hip-hop by way of the deejay/talk-over tradition. This fact is certainly indisputable. But that emerges as a style of expression that merges with pre-existing African-American vernacular traditions and is merely one of many elements of a sound system. Rapping, although historically related, is not deejaying! These oral practices come out of very different histories and adaptive and artistic responses to experience; what Brathwaite calls the "history of the voice" is certainly not homogeneous or monolithic. However the cultural structure within which this activity takes place, derives from what Kool Herc transplants in the early 1970s.

Although Jamaicans have long claimed to have "invented" rap, the cross-cultural dynamics of reggae and hip-hop are only beginning to be taken seriously by African Americans. This tendency towards parochialism is merely a shadow of the ethnocentrism of the larger American culture. The intimacy of reggae and hip-hop is nothing more than a contemporary manifestation of tense and productive relationships established by a century of Caribbean immigration. New York, after all, has been a Caribbean city since very early on in this century and cultural forms like calypso owe much to New York and its recording studios early in the twentieth-century.

Herc, whose people came from St. Mary, emigrated from Jamaica in 1967 to a city that had become synonymous with post-industrial decline and urban blight. In such a context it now makes sense that disenfranchised youth would flock to this "alternate public sphere" in the way that their island cousins flocked to Duke Reid's, Downbeat, Tom's the Great Sebastian and others. On the other side of "the pond," Horace Campbell in *Rasta and Resistance* mentions that the sound system although it had been established there since the initial landfall of Caribbean immigrants, became in seventies Britain the "primary source of identification and recreation" for Afro-Caribbean urban youth.<sup>8</sup> So this period is a really important period across the black Diaspora; important not only due to the politics of the time, but how that politics—one of cross-cultural, yet intra-racial influence—gets articulated in sound. Perhaps the energies of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's work at this time allows us to complete the picture of the black Diaspora music scene at this time. Fela, after all, was appropriating James Brown—who he'd claimed "stole" his music—for his own explorations of politics, music and ritual in Nigeria after his exposure to late-60s Black American nationalism in Los Angeles. An echo chamber indeed.

Over in the Bronx, ghetto survivors clustered around Kool Herc's sound, which was known to have the most crushing decibel levels and which, by way of sheer volume, devastated other local sounds (later to be called crews) like Afrika Bambaata's Zulu Nation. Herc also brought with him the idea of soaking his records in water to remove the identifying labels; or he would just scratch them off to prevent opposing crews from locating the sources of his beats. This we know was common practice in Jamaican sound culture since the earliest days of sound-clash bashments. Although he did not introduce the already existing role of the crowd-controlling MC, Kool Herc's MC Coke La Rock was crucial to the development of hip-hop ritual language. Some, however, claim that Coke La Rock was in fact the first Hip Hop MC.

But it was not reggae music that Kool Herc was playing. After an initial attempt to play yard music, he was forced by local tastes to play funk, the kind of hard-edged rhythm and blues that produces the grand griot James Brown who it must be claimed did more for 1970s Jamaican deejays (like Big Youth, U-Roy and so many others) than any other single person. His rad-

ical departure from western harmony and song structure, his retreat into "sonority contrasts," what Brathwaite calls "noise effects," provided the wordless dread at both the end of Civil Rights possibilities and (to extend it via Big Youth, Brown's most prominent dread imitators in the wake of soul-man Dave Barker) the end of the utopian promises of national "independence." Brown joyfully abandoned language and embraced the cabalistic possibilities of pure sound. Even more important than the fact that Herc switched to funk, is the fact that he eventually developed the aesthetic of breakbeats by a subtle re-definition of the possibilities of domestic stereo equipment:

The only thing better than dancing to James Brown's "Give It Up or Turn It Loose" was letting loose on the "break" parts, when just the instruments jammed. The break was a sonic orgasm, the climactic part of a song, but the only problem was that it was too short. Herc remedied the situation: Using identical copies of a record, each on a different turntable, he cut back and forth between the desired break, actually creating his own extended version--a continuous beat that he called the break beat. It was pure adrenaline, and the people loved it. Soon, Herc was buying records just for their instrumental breaks.<sup>9</sup>

The break beat is arguably the most crucial aspect of hip-hop and its attendant sub-culture/social movement. I want to argue and emphasize that it is a distinct development of Jamaican "versioning" as well as the turntable juggling of two-deck sound systems.

But there is so much more to this than can be communicated by historical detail. Within the study of reggae or even hip hop there is little attention paid to the actual experience of listening. The ecstatic moment of the break is the moment when the song breaks from its narrative build-up, expands an isolated non-narrative moment in time and then returns to continuity. The break is in this regard akin to the blue notes in African American music, the vibrato in the blues: it is the aestheticizing of rupture and the extension of that pain, transcending it by its beauty. But rather than emphasizing the angst of this space of discontinuity, the beat is a joyful adrenaline rush. The break is the moment of *ekstasis*, where the ritual participant enters into the gateways of trance and encounters the possibilities of a freedom unheard of in the world of narrative, the world of hierarchical domination where time and perception are constructions of those classes and races in power.

British critic Jon Savage has described pop music as being driven by the desire for transcendence. For the descendants of slaves for whom "work" is still tainted by the inequalities of a system based on White European domination and rigid class hierarchies, this "break" is a moment of liberation that is pregnant with deep-seated historical yearnings and utopian visions.

But this moment of trance, when the bass, vocals and melodies drop out leaving the pure, non-narrative "break" is a moment of dub; a moment of existential dread. In early reggae music, the technique of separating the rhythm section (bass and drums) from the keyboards and horns via the mixing board was a technique partly influenced by the instrumental break in late 1960s American rhythm and blues/soul records. It is the case that the minimalist bass- and drum-heavy instrumental funk records of the early seventies by the JBs, the Meters and others, inspired dub reggae which in turn influenced the later generation of studio-based musical forms like disco, house and hip hop. Dub, as with Herc's early dual turntable beat matching, becomes an independent form by radically transforming a linear narrative (a song) and refuses the very notion of "finality," of metaphoric landfall or arrival. This as we all know, is where the notion of the re-mix was born, a product of financial necessity which becomes deep metaphysical exploration and which provides even today, some of the most important set of technological and aesthetic innovations in the history of recorded sound. It is also the most blatant form of capitalism: it maximizes profit while minimizing labor. It turns producers into artists and re-introduces finished commodities back into the cycle of production and further commodifies the spiritual and social experience of sound.

Now it is clear that in the age of dancehall, to argue in Jamaica for the over-riding significance of dub, a form that reached its Jamaican heyday in the early and mid seventies is to come home with last week's news. This is why it is important to acknowledge that the echoes of this cultural tradition still ring out loud in the Diaspora and in fact blanket and subsume contemporary Jamaican cultural production. The echo is far louder than the original sound! It is important to be aware of what happens when a native sound booms so loud and so far that others hear it and become changed by it and dare to boom back. For it can be said that dub as a term is more accurately a strategy or, as many would argue, a world-view, a way of hearing. Today's most cutting edge music and expressive cultures owe their very existence to dub: hip hop, breakbeat, drum'n'bass (named after an old term for version), techno, house, ambient, trip hop/downtempo, "post-rock," two step/UK garage and even the digital sound manipulations of dancehall which have long gone beyond the formal structures of reggae riddim.

Today dub re-issues are the music of choice for the new generations of American aural explorers and the influence of dub on the generation of seventies Britain is abundantly clear. It is shocking to many non-Jamaican music lovers when they are told that dub is dead in Jamaica and is not a concern to its scholars and music community. As a form it is, like ska, vibrant and alive outside of Jamaica. And like all prophecy, it has been in some ways neglected (or just outgrown) in its native land. Because dub is where the very limited technologies of

early Jamaican sound recording get manipulated beyond the expectations of the original designers, it has proven to be the blueprint for (post-) modern studio-based music.

Certainly dancehall is all the rage, and roots reggae and even ska still have strong communities of support all over the world. But dub has emerged triumphant in its influence for its metaphysical and historical textures and, perhaps most important, as an example of how cold, alienating Western technologies can be domesticated by those not intended for its use. For it is through dub that the mixing board becomes an instrument and sound becomes isolated within the context of music as the focus of production. It is through dub that the fundamental dynamics of human thought--sound, silence and echo--become fore-grounded through technology. And it is through dub that memory becomes the explicit focus of ritual:

Because it's most often applied to an already-familiar song or rhythm track, dub has a uniquely poignant quality: memories are revived, but rather than being simply duplicated (as when we hear a "golden oldie" from our youth on the radio) they are given subtle twists. Memory is teased rather than dragged up, and is thereby heightened. It is, above all, the supreme sound of surprise, whether that of an gushed, Echoplexed scream, or a rimshot mechanically flared into a facsimile of thunder, or a steady bass riff suddenly and mysteriously disappearing in the middle of a bar (with an effect like that of stepping into an empty lift shaft). . .<sup>10</sup>

Lamming's celebration of the ritual power of radio prepares us to see how Western technology enables the expression alternate world-views and alternate histories. In his vision (more appropriately, a "sounding" as African American critic Houston Baker would call it) "The Dead are now honoured by their absence; preserved in our memories, summoned by engineers to inhabit the little magic box of sound." This, it seems to me, is what happens when the magic of science meets the bush-magic of black post-colonial reality. Lamming appropriates radio for his usage: the dead here are not the white dead, but the deaf black corpses in the Atlantic purgatory. Through its technological innovations, reggae has provided us with the history of Caliban and radio, the slave and the machine. Indeed, Lee "Scratch" Perry (who has become one of the most revered reggae performer/producers in the world today, decades after his star faded in Jamaica) describes his seventies dub tracks as being full of "ghosts."

Ghosts in the mix, *duppies* in the machine. King Tubby and others like Errol Thompson, Overton "Scientist" Brown and Lloyd "Prince/King Jammy" James--and so many other producer/engineers whose names still need to be rescued from the purgatory of history--played the mixing board like an instrument upon which one could improvise. They effectively turned a popular music into an abstract concept where the ear has to listen far beyond the

melody, far below the bass, and where the mind has to constantly adjust to a vision (a sounding) of the world where meaning seems to reside everywhere and, yet, nowhere.

And always, there is the bass, in and out, disorienting like too much movement, the fits and starts of out-migration. In its absence it creates the desire for roots, for home. And the voices. From far away, trailing just out of reach. Echoes. Messages distorted, yet vaguely familiar. Memory. Melody, that technique of artistic and cultural consistency--mathematically precise, necessarily predictable--becomes subject to the "ground bass" and is never allowed to fully satisfy your remembering; for when the melody returns it is either transformed yet the same or painfully joyous like a homecoming. All of this primarily by way of echo and reverb. Like Jimi Hendrix's use of distortion in the late 1960s, this use of echo opens up the template of recorded sound and tears a new dimension in our hearing. Dub has taught the world how to listen, how to trace knowledge far beneath and beyond the obvious, how to read sound. And it has taught us all how crucial sound and listening are for our sense of roots, routes and culture.

For Jamaican producers in the early days, technology was without its assumed limitations and its laws of standard operation; for hip-hop producers and djs, breaking all of the conventions was necessary for the creation of what is a very modern (or even post-modern) world-view. The gunshots in hip-hop samples; the police sirens; random ambient sounds and textures; the use of mistakes to create the illusion of "feel;" the bass tones recorded in the red to ground the listeners; the atonality of turntable scratching techniques (which have now begun appearing in Jamaican sound system practices); and, most important, the use of echo and reverb to create the illusion of vast distances, of grand amounts of empty space crossed by weary black feet and minds. These studio techniques construct the sensation of a restless searching for roots and the never-ending tensions of dispersal.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing about the inexorable cross-influences and echoing that gives the black Diaspora its restless logic, is the fact that meanings accrue to a sound or a symbol or a person completely independent of the original intention. This is the problem of all communication and why I feel it necessary to defend a hearing of reggae semi-independent of Jamaican discourse despite my own Afro-Caribbean roots and routes. Where reggae music is a product of specific material and historical processes in Jamaica, the moment it becomes intimate with the "little magic box of sound" it no longer means what it meant to the singer, producer or even to its primary community. For example, who would have thought that ska music would have been so appropriated by white racists for their own anti-black mythologies? Or that in partly response to the particularistic nationalism of dancehall, the rest of the world would unearth ska, dub and roots? Who could have predicted that what so many saw and see in the tradition that is reggae is not just what it says, but how it says what it says?

From a Diaspora perspective, it is clear that Jamaica has become mythic homeland for techniques of technology and culture. This cannot be stressed enough: a black third world country is being celebrated for its technological innovations--in fact the digital techniques of dancehall production should not be seen simply as music, but as the cutting edge of Jamaica's engagement with the information revolution. As Jacques Attali so elegantly states, "the political economy of music is not marginal, but premonitory. The noises of a society are in advance of its images and material conflicts."<sup>11</sup> In short, encoded in sound--linear, analog roots and the hard-disc dispersal of dancehall, for example--are the social, cultural and economic relationships of the future. This is why the very aesthetics of reggae are so crucial. The studio is also the site of metaphors of space and movement, roots and belonging across the entire dream-scape of black Diaspora. Here local realities become global myths; ghetto rude-boys and drug-gists become international symbols of black struggle; red-eyed under-class dropouts become prophets; downtown *bangarang* becomes theory and cultural politics.

So who is Dr. Satan? Reggae mythology is well known for its attention to oppression and domination and its Anansi-esque cultural politics. Escape, transformation and linguistic hustling are featured in this tradition; movement, innovation and restlessness are its common concerns and power its explicit focus. The persona in reggae inexorably confronts Babylon or Pope Paul or Busha or the Slave Master or Mr. Brown. He also often exploits his own power in the marginalization of various others--women, gays and lesbians, informers, other sound-boys and cultural "outsiders." In this case, Dr. Satan is the image of techno-cultural authority. The title of this piece comes from Rupie Edwards's biblically resonant "Let There Be Version," which was originally entitled by the name of the rhythm "Yamaha Skank." Some claim that this album was the genesis of one-rhythm albums. Because each version was so different, it was enjoyed not only for tunes such as Shorty the President's title tune or "My Conversation" by Slim Smith and the Uniques or even the early Heptones song "Give Me the Right." It was enjoyed for the constant playing with possibilities within a limited, pre-given set of circumstances; it was cherished for the relentless manipulation of familiarity and the re-ordering of memory.

The studio band Success All-Stars weighs in with an echo-drenched dub track entitled "Dr. Satan Echo Chamber" which clearly evokes an awareness of the sinister designs of he who originally invented the technology. The echo chamber is not just the machine-world of global capitalism, but also the metaphor of the Diaspora as a process, as a technology of change in which reggae is not only a product but also a productive mechanism.

It has been taken for granted for some time now that the drum is the defining characteristic of African-based expressive traditions. Transformations in drumbeats and rhythm not only mark changes in black musical forms, but also changes in black aesthetics from class to

class, culture to culture, generation to generation. To continue this foundation myth of Diaspora, reggae should be seen as the form which realized that it was not the drum that was crucial, but the beat itself; and that in amplifying and modifying the beat even those far-flung members of the community--now that plantations are transnational and Africa is worldwide--could dance to it and in dancing, remember and re-invent their own possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the Inaugural Bob Marley Lecture for the Institute of Caribbean Studies (Reggae Studies Unit) at the University of the West Indies, Kingston Jamaica. It was delivered on Tuesday, November 18th, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Ellison, 242.

<sup>3</sup> Frazier, 73.

<sup>4</sup> Lamming, 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Brathwaite, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Rutherford, 398.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell 186.

<sup>9</sup> Fernando 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Potash, 146

<sup>11</sup> Attali, 11