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Jean Binta Breeze's "Slam Poem" and the Politics of Dancehall

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If, as de Caires Narain (2007) claims, “in many male-authored texts ‘woman’ functions as metaphor while ‘man’ functions as agent in the struggle for nationhood” (72), then Jamaican Jean Binta Breeze in a series of her dancehall-influenced texts positions the woman as a fully functional human being, possessing agency to be reckoned with. Critical sentiment regarding lurid commodification of female corporeality and normative heterosexuality resurfaces both in Breeze’s “Red Rebel Song” (1992) and her “Slam Poem” (2000). The former text, is an expression of the multi-layered personality of the speaker, endeavouring to escape the MANacles of objectification: “is years/of ungluing Iself/from de fabric of lust/dat have I/in a pin-up glare” (Breeze, Spring 2), while the latter poem writes back to Beenie Man’s “Who Am I” (1998), a dancehall hit that celebrates machismo and glorifies the Jamaican deejay’s sexual prowess¹. Breeze’s choice is by no means random since “[d]espite dancehall music’s anti-authority stand and rootedness in ghetto culture, its politics [manifested by the genre-specific lyrical slackness] are generally considered the antithesis of those espoused by dub poets” (Sharpe 447), with whom Breeze is critically associated. However, as Carolyn Cooper rightly observes,

¹ By referring to an influential dancehall single, Breeze subscribes to an unofficial sorority of similarly-minded feminism-driven Jamaican women poets, singers and deejays, all of whom actively participate in the nation-encompassing public debates generated by the island’s primary export—music. For instance, Jamaican dancehall musician Macka Diamond recorded an intertextual “counter tune ‘Tek Con’, the ladies’ call to arms [in] response to Vybz Kartel’s controversial ‘Tek’. Macka’s no-nonsense chat, dismissing the ‘pots and pans’ Vybz offers women in return for sex in ‘Tek’, definitely resonated with Jamaican females” (Bentley 12).

[r]ub-a-dub style, the noisy idiom of [for instance] Bob Marley’s explosive class politics, is also the erotic body language of the [reggae and dancehall] DJs. In the ‘rub-a-dub’ aesthetics of the dancehall, two modes of self expression and social protest converge: one, that of the DJs, is overtly sexual and covertly political; the other, that of the singers [and classic dub poets], is overtly political and covertly sexual. Both modes of expression are ‘rhythm[s] resisting against the system’, to quote Bob Marley’s “One Drop” from the *Survival* album (Owusu 379).

In addition to being a literary version of a sound system clash, hip hop diss/beef and/or a calypso picong, all of which are verbal and musical contests in which contenders endeavour to ridicule their opponents, Breeze’s “Slam Poem”² acts as a socially committed dub poem-like poster campaign: (1) it promotes contraception—“yuh she wen yuh put it awn/yuh nah feel nutten/lang time me feel de same/fah yuh nah touch mi likkle button/an wen you let aff/an you feel sweet/nine month later/me regret she me did dweet” (Breeze, *Arrival* 42); (2) it lambasts unprotected sex—“an mi nuh even staat talk/bout oomuch ooman yuh gat/mi nuh know oomuch crease/yuh a dip yuh bat/so jus zip up back yuh trousis/no badda wheel out dat/fah AIDS cyan cure/wid a penicillin shat” (Breeze, *Arrival* 44); (3) finally, it castigates men, represented by the poem’s male character Leroy, for their sweeping negligence, both in the bedroom—“an all de beg mi beg/yuh sey yuh nah use yuh tongue/fah yuh don’t want yuh man pride/lie dung a grung/but so so penetration/cyan bring me come/a weh yuh want me have/is a belly come dung” (Breeze, *Arrival* 44) and outside: “den yuh bawl out she/dat abortion is a crime/but yuh cyan feed pickney/(...) mi hear seh yuh lef/one bwoy pickney in Jamaica/an since yuh come a Englan/yuh have two baby madda” (Breeze, *Arrival* 43).

Critical of males’ reckless behaviour and their sexism-fuelled arrogance as “Slam Poem” is, the text is also a foray into the Caribbean cultural territory and undoubtedly it reflects the ambivalently carnival nature of the

² The title of the poem promulgates a number of ideas that include (1) the nod to the tradition of contest-like slam poetry, (2) an acknowledgement of the confrontational nature of Breeze’s interventionist text and (3) a lexical reference to the obstinacy of the male who refuses to take necessary precautionary measures and, as requested by the female, use a condom. Defending his manly virtues by means of alpha male logic, the lover prefers unbridled sexual intercourse, punningly comparing the prophylactic to a prison (“slammer”) that bars him from the joys of copulation (“slam”). Exasperated by the man’s whys and wherefores, the woman speaker of “Slam Poem” chastises the male bluntly, asserting her agency: “so if yuh don’t have yuh slam/tek yuh han affa mi...raaaaaas” (Breeze, *Arrival* 45).

region. In doing so, Breeze, who maintains that “[i]t’s critical for Caribbean women poets to explore their sexuality a lot more rather than allowing the men to define women’s sexuality without the women” (Sharpe 613), transgresses, as defined by de Caires Narain (2003), the “rigidly demarcated ... cultural spaces occupied by men and women” (78). Ultimately, in “Slam Poem” Breeze’s female persona does not dance attendance on her male partner but, with recourse to her own repertoire of rhetorical figures, attends to her own individualised needs.

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Environmental Philosophy and Space in Literature: Landscaping and the Chronotope

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The environmental ethicist Holmes Rolston III offers a useful definition of “landscape” that can be applied to literary representations of space. Landscaping, the process of creating intellectual and physical landscapes, can be combined with a theoretical framework that takes an intertextual approach informed by M.M. Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope. Rolston defines “landscape” against “environment,” “ecology,” and “nature” as “the scope of nature, modified by culture, from some locus ... [I]n that sense landscape is local, located” (379). Therefore, landscape depends on the subject’s position toward a given object. In Rolston’s view, environment “is not [his] creation; it is the creation. [He] do[es] not constitute it; it has constituted [him]; and ... it seems arrogant and myopic to speak of foreground and background, of what [he] frame[s] on [his] horizons” (381). He emphasises the landscape’s influence on forming a subject’s experience and limitations (horizons). Because an experiencing subject’s perceptual limits and position toward the world entail cultural modification to that experience, an experience is never itself “pure” and always involves an element of landscape. Because this cultural modification must be either physical or perceptual, it follows that this aspect of a subject’s experience is local and phenomenological. But it is also conditioned by that perceiver’s cultural experience. The relationship between the perceiver and a given landscape is therefore dialectical: “[a]ctual landscapes keep impacting us, and our worldviews keep having to answer to this impact, willy-nilly, when we constitute our landscapes. Landscape is not passive; it acts on us. The constituting is a two-way affair (Rolston 383). This process of mutual influence, Rolston argues, “qualifies one for aesthetic experience” (381).

Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope as metaphorically applied to literature

can be combined with this philosophical view of space as landscapes. This concept is borrowed from mathematical discourse and informs part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Bakhtin summarizes it as follows:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. (84)

Both time and space are implicitly expressed as interrelated; time qualifies spatial meanings and vice versa. Language is used to speak for the landscape from a perspective that sees it as a site of traditional symbolic value as well as from contesting positions that overall contribute to define textual spaces for the confrontation and interaction of differing discourses. These values are represented synchronically, as spaces that are placed in juxtaposition to each other, and diachronically, as spaces that accrue meaning through the dialectical process of landscaping. The chronotope is therefore a specific form of landscaping that contributes to cultural understandings of space. A synthesis of these two concepts is especially relevant to ecocritical approaches to literature, as it combines Rolston's environmental philosophical notion of landscaping with Bakhtin's ecologically inflected theory of the chronotope.

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All Ketchum's Ladies

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“You think you know about pain?” One cannot help the feeling that the question posed by the narrator of “The Girl Next Door” has a smack of irony in it. We may not know. Not yet. But Jack Ketchum probably does; his women certainly do. He so willingly adopted Poe’s claim for the death of a beautiful woman in literary works and a popular demand for such, that the conjunction of death and femininity forms a rich and disturbing stratum of his literary works. But what differentiates Ketchum’s females from the rest of the favorite subjects of the horror genre is that they are analyzed as both the victims and the perpetrators of violence. From the Mother of a savage human family in his debut “Off Season” (1980), who reveals a taste for flesh and lurks in the darkening woods, to the female sole survivor of the feral cannibalistic family in his recent novel “The Woman” (2011), Ketchum’s women proudly convert the “cookie-cut” model of a swooning damsel in distress into characters who strangely resemble Stretch—an apocalyptic avenger of “Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2.”

From Medea to Sharon Stone’s ice-pick murder suspect in “Basic Instinct,” the image of a violent woman—as wife, mother, daughter, or lover—has fascinated readers and audiences in a way other figures have not. And Ketchum’s prose has them all. His vicious women are new icons who enhance in extreme ways transformations in intimacy, social life, and public attitudes. They are the epigones of the “traditional” practitioners of evil—men; they similarly lack empathy and conscience. The V-factor that they all possess embraces their violent, vehement and vengeful nature.

“The Aunt from The Girl Next Door” (1989) has it. On a quiet tree-lined, dead-end street, in the dark damp cellar turned into a genuine chamber of horrors, she is orchestrating “big-time” for teenage Meg and her crippled sister Susan—whose parents are now dead, and who are left captive to her

savage whims and rages. Leila of “She Wakes” (1984) has it too; a gorgeous but dangerous woman, who befriends a group of tourists to lure them into a nightmare of pain and terror; who lives to seduce and destroy, to feed off her human prey. And the ladies of “The Ladies’ Night” (1997) have it; their carnage triggered by their metamorphosis into gruesomely instinctual brutes and mantis-like predators.

The man whom Stephen King considers the scariest guy in America, has frequently been accused of abusing gore, splatter and exploitation. Yet like no other contemporary American horror writer, without the need for overtly ornamented prose and with seemingly no effort, Ketchum aims at the heart of so many unmentionable issues, such as rape, incest, drugs and violence, and all these so ferociously executed by women. The way actual violence toward women and by women operates in Ketchum’s fiction not only reveals specific acts but highlights the fears, anxieties, and hopes that are dramatized by women whose acts challenge our past notions of female vulnerability.