



From Stage to Page: Jamaican Diaspora in the poetry of Jean “Binta” Breeze

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In the 1970's when reggae was gaining musical ground, artists were adding instrumental sides to their records (also known as the dub side) and deejays started talking over the beats. This was also referred to as toasting or chatting. Poets were also producing and performing new styles of work based on the sounds of dub music. Their poetry, “like dub music, was subversive, revolutionary and anti-establishment.”¹ Poet Oku Onuora was the first to coin this poetry as “dub poetry”. He said the term referred to “a poem that has a built in it reggae rhythm, hence, when the poem is read ... one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem.”² It began as mainly protest, or rebel poetry, carrying over many of the messages that traditional reggae music carried. The sounds in the poems, as much as the actual words themselves, were meant to portray the life of the poor, the forgotten, the struggle endured by so many.

Reminiscent of Africa, Jamaica has always been a place of oral traditions. Words have extreme power and influence, and spoken word even more so. “Both literate and illiterate Jamaicans are inclined to regard spoken word as something of real substance and real power.”³ Proof of this can be found all over the history of Jamaica from religion to social conflict to music and literature. Hugh Hughes in *Soon Come* opines that Jamaicans have a certain gift of “using rhythmic and linguistic subversion to fight the forces of oppression,”⁴ and of doing so in very unique and successful ways. This is seen even in everyday communication. Creole and the regional languages which evolved from it, sometimes called dread talk, have rhythmic and linguistic characteristics which almost sound like music in themselves. In his famous work, *History of a Voice*, Kamau Brathwaite, an important Caribbean poet, called Creole the Nation Language. He argues that it “displays musical rhythms, such as calypso and reggae, unlike the dominant iambic rhythms in English poetry.”⁵ Some poets are in it to the extent that they refuse to use English, referring to it as the “language of the down-pressor, forced upon them in captivity.”⁶ Louise Bennett, a forerunner of dub poetry, was one of the first to use Creole as a literary language. She caught a lot of slack for it, but she stood her ground and won the battle, paving the way for artists to speak and perform in the Nation Language all over the world.⁷

It is hard to say exactly who the first official dub poet was. Linton Kwesi Johnson was the first to release an album in the genre, *Dread, Beat an' Blood* released in 1977.⁸ Born in rural Jamaica in 1952, he moved to Brixton, London with his mother when he was eleven. Johnson learned firsthand about the pain and rage of racism when he moved to Brixton, London and this contributed a lot to his work and his popularity. In the 1960's, he became very active in the Black Panther movement and the fight against racism. He connected with a lot of people who felt the pain in his words and found refuge in his rhythms. During the

beginning of his career he was looked down upon for his use of patios, or Nation Language, and now he is one of the most respected men in dub poetry.⁹

A theory of modern black subjectivities that are Third World, rural, domestic and female is available in the work of a diasporic Jamaican female performer, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, who employs reggae music and radio technology for staging Jamaican women's cultural identities. Her chosen African middle name 'Binta' means 'close to the heart.' In her later travels around the world, she discovered its Arabic meaning of 'daughter of', (bint), and the South African word for a runaway's bag. Breeze left Jamaica for England in the 1980s, and upon the invitation of Johnson made her debut UK performance at the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books in 1985. Johnson said that Breeze was a special voice with a better understanding of the relationship between the musicality of the Jamaican language and reggae music itself. "She has gone on to earn a reputation for herself as a distinctive voice in British Caribbean poetry," "Her poem *Riddym Ravings*, also known as Mad Woman is regarded as a classic in contemporary Caribbean poetry." A dynamic storyteller, Breeze's performances are so powerful that she has been called a 'one-woman festival'. A revered and respected artist, her poems use personal stories and historical narratives to explore social injustice and the psychological dimensions of black women's experiences. "As a woman, as a Caribbean woman, as a black woman, I have not been expected to be so strongly political," Breeze explains. "Having become so strongly political, I have not been expected to be sexual or sensual."

She was born in rural Jamaica and moved to Kingston to study at the Jamaican School of Drama with other poets such as Michael Smith and Oku Onuora and Mutabaruka. She began working with Muta and getting her voice on the air in Jamaica. Linton Kwesi Johnson heard what she had to say and invited her to come record with him; hence the move to England in 1985.¹⁰ Breeze is a big advocate for the performance of a piece rather than just reading it, which comes from her love of theater. In an interview she shares, "I mean, acting is one of my first loves. And I think I write so many dramatic monologues because I am searching for lines that ask me to use all of the acting skills I possess...I actually hear voices. When I start writing, I actually hear them speaking."¹¹ Reggae, and its off springs of dub and dancehall, have spread throughout the African Diaspora. In its Jamaican birthplace, however, reggae is not simply one among several black musical styles but it is also the one that predominates. Its rhythm, from its early roots to its most recent incarnation as dancehall music, can be heard booming from large storefront sound systems, ghetto blasters and the radios that people listen to in their homes, cars, at work and on the streets. Gilroy claims that music is central to a black sense of self, and one can make a stronger case for the constitutive power of music in Jamaica, where more records per capita are produced than in any other part of the globe.¹² By invoking the mediation of the music through the radio and rhythm box, Breeze decentres the DJ as artist through Jamaican women's consumption of music rather than a cut-and-mix style that consigns them to a more passive role.

Breeze's writing style cannot be contained within one genre; it is a unique fusion of dub poetry, spoken word, and reggae rhythms, enhanced all the more by her exuberant performance style, and touched with her critical identity as a woman. The junction of home-to-home identity is what forms the basis of analysis of Breeze and her work. In his

essay ‘Some Problems with British in a Black British Canon,’ John McLeod terms this acute crossing of identities as “transnationalism” This concept reveals itself in the poetry of Jean Binta Breeze. Most of her poems are written in the authentic Jamaican ‘vernacular’ of her speaking voice—her spelling and word choice read as if they had been transposed for the page. This distinct style immediately stops the reader before they even begin to interpret what the words are saying. Before they can understand, they must become acclimated to the sound, the rhythm, and the grammar of her lines, almost as if reading a new language entirely. This is a way of bringing the foreign reader immediately into an in-between position of poetry reading that, in a way, requires us to ‘translate’ the words on the page into words we are used to reading and speaking. This immediate subconscious translating action exemplifies Breeze’s crossing over of nation to nation. Although the poems Breeze are located in London, they can be defined as what Jahan Ramazani would term “translocal” poems, “in that they see the metropolis afresh through the lenses of non-metropolitan history, language and power, and shuttle across and unsettle imperial hierarchies of centre and periphery, motherland and colonial offspring.” Not only do the poems rewrite the English literary canon by appropriating and transforming the Tales from what might be called a “postcolonial perspective”; they also expose and reveal the many transnational influences shaping up and complicating the notion of “national literatures” by highlighting the inadequacies of strictly national canons and their fictive quality.

Breeze’s early poems, written while she still lived in Jamaica, were strident political messages that condemned the severe austerity measures imposed after Prime Minister Michael Manley signed with the IMF in 1978. ‘*Aid Travels With A Bomb*’ shows the ‘structural adjustments’ made to encourage foreign investments to be yet another form of colonization. The designation of factories as export-free zones meant that the government received no compensation for providing cheap labour and could not prevent them from relocating to more cost-effective locations:

They want to invest
 But your country don’t get
 When it come to the test
 Dem gone home wid all de profit
 Your government left
 Upholding a racket. 13

In ‘To Plant’, Breeze is critical of the IMF recommendation that agriculture be shifted from produce for local consumption to cash crops for export. She sings about how these recommendations have contributed to world hunger:

For de hungry getting rampant
 An de food is growing scarce
 De prices getting steeper
 De lan space jus kean waste. 14

These early poems are spoken out of a national pride that positions itself against the complicity of the national bourgeoisie with the forces of neo-colonialism. But the national voice is female gendered. In ‘To Plant’, Breeze assumes the traditional role of the woman as food provider in order to criticize the government for following the IMF recommendations that shifted agricultural production to cash crops and import food for

local consumption. She is also critical of the dumping of surplus food and destruction of the land used to store nuclear waste in 'Aid Travels With A Bomb'. The neo-colonial relations that Breeze exposes in her early poems have not disappeared but only deepened with globalization.

Breeze's *Riddym Ravings* – which was published in 1988 and several poems of which were included on her 1989 LKJ Records release *Tracks* – stages the financial, emotional and psychological difficulties that working class Jamaican women experience.¹⁵ Her own diasporic existence between London and Sandy Bay is perhaps what gives this collection its keen sense of how global cultures are woven into the fabric of everyday life in Jamaica. In sharp contrast to her earlier work, in which a female-gendered voice was embedded into the public voice of the nation, the poems in this collection include dramatic monologues that express Jamaican women's thoughts and experiences that are distinct from a larger discourse of nation. *Riddym Ravings* denotes Breeze's break with dub poetry both in terms of its reggae rhythm and testimonial delivery style. As she explains, 'I lost the need to teach or preach, especially to audiences already converted, and found the courage to tell'.¹⁶ The poems not only stage the economic and social marginalization of Jamaican women but also produce a black female subjectivity out of reggae's dancehall culture. Dancehall, which is the new synthesized and electronic music that emerged from reggae in the eighties, is often characterized as a black Atlantic sound linking Kingston, New York and London.¹⁷ But, at the local level, the term refers to the mobile sound systems travelling throughout Jamaica bringing an urban sound to remote rural areas. ¹⁸

Hans Enzensberger, building on Frantz Fanon's writings on the radio as an instrument for advancing the Algerian revolution, saw the revolutionary potential of the radio to turn actors into authors. He explains, however, that as an instrument for change, the radio was able to transmit as well as receive signals.¹⁹ In her use of the radio as a metaphor for female sexual energy, Breeze imagines a woman who can turn her receiver into a transmitter through the mere flick of a switch:

an jus
flip a switch
tun mi receive
to transmitta
checking anadda one
wanderin troo
de sonic boom of a bassline.²⁰

In contrast to the dancehall diva's explicit display of her sexuality, the woman standing quietly in the corner equalizes gender relations by sending her sexual desire through the sound waves of the music. Breeze uses the cyborgian image of a woman whose body is inhabited by a radio for representing a black female subjectivity that is rooted in the vernacular of Jamaica's dancehall culture. This subjectivity is not to be equated with a consciousness, because the rhythm box is in the woman's body rather than her mind. The question is not whether dancehall produces a revolutionary consciousness but how Jamaican women insert themselves into a popular cultural form in order to assert themselves in a world over which they have little control. ²¹

Breeze also fuses the female body with radio technology in ‘*Riddym Ravings* (the mad woman’s poem)’, where the ravings of a pregnant country woman issue from a radio embedded in her head. The poem is delivered in the voice of one of those crazy women seen wandering the city streets, singing and talking to themselves. Breeze has remarked that it ‘represents the whole dislocation of a rural agricultural community into an urban setting of mass unemployment’.²² Dislocation is one aspect of modernity belonging to globalization, and in ‘*Riddym Ravings*’ the effect that the IMF’s ‘structural adjustments’ have had on the rural poor can be seen. The country woman in ‘*Riddym Ravings*’ has been evicted for failing to pay her rent and ends up on the streets with nothing but her ‘Channel One riddym box’. That same night a DJ flies into her head and plays this song:

Eh, Eh,
no feel no way
town is a place dat ah really kean stay
dem kudda – ribbit mi han
eh – ribbit mi toe
mi waan go a country go look mango.²³

‘Ribbit’ (rivet) is a DJ term for describing the state of being caught in a heavy dub beat. In the song the woman hears in her head, the term refers to her being caught in the city but nonetheless able mentally to escape to the country through music. For her, the city is not a place of meeting and mobilization for ‘the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic’, the way Homi Bhabha describes a global city like London.²⁴ In a Third World city like Kingston, an unemployed country woman has no claim to a home or even the public space of the streets. After her landlord evicts her, she is picked up and sent to Bellevue, which is both a poorhouse and a mental hospital. The homeless woman’s madness is the overt manifestation of her effort to avert her dehumanization in the city through the memory of country life back home. In identifying slavery as the first modern experience, Morrison characterizes madness as a strategy for survival: ‘Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad ... “in order not to lose your mind”’.²⁵ The idea of ‘deliberately going mad’ makes madness into the exercise of control over the mind in the face of an absence of control over one’s own body:

an a ongle one ting tap mi fram go stark raving mad
a wen mi siddung eena Parade
a tear up newspaper fi talk to
sometime dem roll up
an tun eena one a Uncle But sweet saaf
yellow heart breadfruit
wid piece a roas saalfish side a i.²⁶

Although the woman appears to be controlling the song she hears, it is not clear whether it originates in her mind or in the outside world, as she hears the same song playing on the bus she attempts to take back home:

an sometime mi a try board de bus
an de conductor bwoy a halla out seh
‘dutty gal, kum affa de bus’
an troo im no hear de riddym eena mi head

same as de tape weh de bus driva a play, seh

The constant clamour of music blasting from huge storefront speakers, boom boxes and tiny transistor radios makes it difficult to locate the country song in any one place. By virtue of its mediation through a technology of reproduction, it has no single origin. When talking about the mobility of today's global cultures, it is important to distinguish between the movement of cultural forms and people. In *'Riddym Ravings'*, the homeless woman lacks the ease of mobility belonging to the music that travels from country to town and perhaps back again. As a social being rather than a cultural form, she suffers the consequences of dislocation. It is not simply the case that she is unemployed; she is also stranded in a large impersonal city like Kingston. Cut off from her extended family that allows her to 'make do' (which is the Jamaican term for women's ability to survive on little or no money), she is ignored, laughed at or run off for being dirty and ragged. She wants to go home, but she does not have the money for bus fare. When, faint from hunger, she attempts to pick up a piece of banana dropped by a girl, she is sent back to Bellevue where the doctor and landlord pull the radio plug out of her head. But as soon as she is back on the street, she pushes it back in so she can continue to hear the song. The madwoman then decides to walk home, the same way her grandmother used to walk to town to sell food. Here, Breeze invokes the memory of street vendors, who dominated the informal economy by selling locally-grown produce in the cities and providing people who lived in rural areas with news gossip, and goods from town."²⁷ However, the domestic network in which the madwoman's grandmother participated is no longer available to her. In a modern world of rapid transportation, the journey from town to country on foot signifies the inability to 'make it' in the city. Taking pride in her appearance, the madwoman strips naked to bathe herself in water running from an open pipe so that she can be clean when she arrives home. However, she is arrested for indecent exposure and returned to the mental hospital.

This time the doctor and landlord remove the entire radio from her head, but when they are not looking, she grabs it and pushes it up in her

belly for her baby to hear:

fah even if mi nuh mek i

me waan my baby know dis yah riddym yah

fram before she bawn.²⁸

By moving the radio from her head to her belly, the woman, like her sister standing in the corner of the dancehall, turns her receiver into a transmitter so that her baby can hear the sounds of the country. Her action of relaying the song to her unborn child transmutes one of the most normative and naturalized significations of the female body – maternity – into a technologically-mediated relation. The poem ends with the mad woman hearing the DJ scream – 'Murther / Pull up Missa Operator!' – the same moment the doctor and landlord send an electric shock through her body.'²⁹ These words, also from dancehall culture, allude to a particularly good or 'murderous' track that an audience wants to hear again. In response to the crowd's enthusiasm, the DJ pulls up the needle and places it at the beginning of the song again.

Breeze performs a word play on 'mother' and 'murder' and the DJ and doctor as 'operators' through which the attempt to kill the music on the operating table is

transformed, through dancehall language, into an act in which the song ends abruptly only so that it might be repeated once again. No matter how many times the forces of law and order attempt to 'cure' the woman by killing the song in her head, they cannot destroy the memory of her home or prevent her from passing on that memory to the next generation.

Breeze draws on the language of deejaying for articulating the consciousness of an unemployed rural woman who is otherwise classified as 'mad'. Yet, she does not simply extend the DJ's voice to the woman. Rather, she reworks it in a manner that does not authenticate both the presupposed masculinity of his voice and the rural origins of the song. As Joan Dayan remarks about the poem, the voice the mad woman hears does not express the male bravado of toasting, which is the name for the slick rhymes the MC or DJ speaks over the music. The wistful expression of a desire to be in the country suggests that the woman 'inhabits the DJ voice' rather than the other way around.³⁰ The image of country life as one of looking for mangoes perhaps displays a romantic nostalgia for a pastoral way of life that no longer exists. But that would be far too literal a reading of the song. For, even as the woman inhabits the DJ voice, the song is inhabited by DJ language ('ribbit'), thus undermining its authenticity as an instance of folk culture. This 'inauthentic' – in the sense of James Clifford's explanation of being 'caught between cultures' – and mechanized – because mediated through the radio – song is the sound of the country caught in the web of globalisation.³¹ The woman has made her way to the city in search of work because an integrated market has destroyed Jamaica's rural economies. At the same time, a global reggae culture connects her with the rural origins from which she is removed.

Speaking of her latest work, *Third World Girl*, which comes with a free DVD featuring Breeze performing live at Leicester's Y Theatre, she adds: "When you see the picture of the woman on the book cover, her face says 'If you touch me I will kill you'. There's a picture of a girl with some really beautiful breasts. Do you dare touch her? No, you daren't. She's in control of her body and if she chooses to expose it, she can." Revealing the inspiration for the title poem, *Third World Girl*, Breeze explains: "I grew up on the north coast of Jamaica. The tourists came and went and in the early days, they'd all be on the same local beach. "In the late '70s, hotel chains took over all the beaches along the north coast and started doing all-inclusive deals. I worked in a hotel up there in Negril. At that time, there were plenty of American women coming over, looking to rent-a-dread.

"But there were also male tourists who approached local women and were quite rude. That's why I called this poem *Third World Girl* because I've heard stories like this from so many third world countries that depend on tourism. I wanted to explore how the black woman feels in those situations.

Breeze resists the concept of a post-colonial black victim identity for women. She avoids the depiction of conflict and violence and directs our attention to the psychological dimensions of women's experience. Breeze is a wonderful storyteller of childhood memories in Kingston, of family life and of the work of mothers at home. Her poems deal with the biological, social, cultural and historical aspects of mothering and, especially, the experience of mothering in the Caribbean diaspora in London.

Atlantic Drift 44
 when I hear
 children's voices
 thrilling through
 my window
 they are not
 water voices
 carried by the trades
 they are here now
 just outside
 my skin
 when the ice queen
 clutches
 I call them in
 warm be
 side my hearth

This seems to be a poem for a speaking voice with a long unit of breath. But the analysis of the poem reveals that the message depends on how we read the lines. We detect the wordplay between "skin" and "ice queen" and the break between "warm be / side my hearth" only with our eyes. Then the poem appears like the beginning of a letter. It alludes to the poet's personal situation: staying in London by herself, she is separated from her children who are living in Jamaica. Voices of nearby children are "thrilling" and remind her of her distant children. The poem's title creates and enhances the distance together with the passive voice of the image of "water voices carried by the trades". Nostalgia and wishful yearning emerge "they are here now just outside my skin". The fairy tale figure of the ice queen refers both to Britain's bad weather and the chill of separation and loneliness. "Warm be / side my hearth" could be read as a wish for the children and an imperative mood for the speaker of the poem to overcome this blue moment. Title, imagery and display of this poem constitute a personal voice ("I") and a universal statement about the situation and the emotions of mothers who are forced to live without their children.

The title piece of her selected poems, *Third World Girl* is one of the newly published ones and is itself a masterpiece. Reversing the 'usual' relationship of subject and object it talks from the perspective of the 'periphery' to posh white men. As the Third World Girl grows up, her reality is her symbolism:

"I peeped at you through bushes

while you browned on my beach"

She lived a childhood where,

"I was held out by the fences round my shores

my water was locked off while your showered"

and in such a place, with its weight of oppressive history, she is “young unknowing, born too old.” The girl is “uncut diamond / unformed pearl”, 33 something beautiful, something unformed and something to be extracted, exploited, polished and sold. Adulthood arrives with its terrible truths. Taken out of her world,
 “you said I brought no traditions, no history

no culture, no religion, no language.”

As a child, the “you” of the poem marred her innocence, but as a young adult, “brought ... to your world”, he (and it must be a he) wants the impossible: “you wanted me to stay the child”. Any chance of their coming together now, post-colonially, cannot avoid the history of their separate ‘worlds’. Breeze reminds us that
 “we kissed on

Star Trek

for the first time

on the screen

had to be under alien spell to get it seen”.

Thus, “our meeting needs to face our history” in a modern multi-perspective where they can see the past while seeing the present, without the denial and without the “guilt trip”, “before the future brings the possibility

Love at first sight
 only happens to the free”.

By writing the stories of Third World Girl, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze has spent nearly thirty years creating poetry that has successfully turned the gaze, making the voice of the person- (particularly the woman) of-colour subject, not object. She has taken a poetry based on a musical style – dub poetry – and both pioneered and innovated within that genre. She has shown us a way to make our personal stories political, to transmute the everyday trivia of our lives into the potent symbolism of art.

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