

# Dub Writing in Marcia Douglas' *The Marvellous Equations of the Dread: A Novel in Bass Riddim*

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“Originally, what they called ‘dub’ was called a version...”

- Michael Veal (2007, 54)

“Books leave certain sounds, a certain pacing; mostly they leave the elusive, which is all the story. They leave much more than the words.”

- Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001)

## Sound Arguments

The Caribbean literary tradition is bound up with what Edward Baugh (2012) has termed the region’s “quarrel with history.” Part of the region’s broader preoccupation with history, this quarrel is rooted in tensions between marginal histories and dominant historical narratives. As such, our literary tradition favors a poetics that reflect folk epistemologies as modes of historiography. Sonic interventions upon and disturbances of traditional approaches to writing are turns toward indigenous vernacular cultural traditions of knowledge production animated by what Vic Reid refers to as “an echo in the bone or a noise in the blood.”<sup>1</sup> Engaging the “quarrel with history,” this article explores the ways writers of Caribbean fiction reference sonic markers in ways that unsettle dominant knowledge and incite critical interrogations of Western<sup>2</sup> history and historiography.

In such Caribbean fiction, written representation of sound is a strategy authors use to counter the hegemony of written language and its attendant claims to epistemic superiority. Referencing West Indian women writers, Evelyn O’Callaghan claims that their literary strategies emerge to address “the difficulty of expressing their experience in the language of the oppressor” (1993, 6). West Indian women writers, O’Callaghan argues, invent forms that draw on “rich resources of the oral traditions” and privilege “linguistic variation” (1993, 6). It is in this same tradition, that writers who deal with Caribbean history enact formal experimentation that inscribes the discursive power of their indigenous language practices in the written word. Thus, I claim that writers of Caribbean fiction engage with structures of sound that influence on their formal choices. Such sonic formal experimentation as critical intervention share resonances with what Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, quoting Barbara Christian, refers to as “the tradition

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of black women whose ‘language, and the grace and pleasure with which they played with it’ sounded all the ways that ‘sensuality is intelligence, sensual language is language that makes sense’” (2018, 2).<sup>3</sup>

Writing sensual language—a conundrum—language that appeals to the senses, for the purposes of this argument, draws on sound knowledge derived from oral/sonic/vernacular cultural performances. The distinctive “Caribbean-ness” of this intervention occurs where sound and orality move beyond mere critiques of writing. It emerges when sound and writing together produce an altogether new “language” that can make sense of the particularities of Caribbean “nonhistory.”<sup>4</sup> More than being an act of subversion or resistance, to write Caribbean “nonhistory” is to affirm that discontinuity is its own valid and generative state of being. Analogous to “nonhistory,” Baugh posits “historylessness” to denote a point of departure from which the writer’s senses of imagination and invention are activated (2012, 64). The range of Caribbean artistic responses to the question of history as seen through the prisms of fragmentation and loss, underscore the reparative potential of experimental writing to reckon absences or silences in “traditional” archives. Which is to say, such writing can re-sound what Michel-Rolph Trouillot might refer to as silenced pasts.

### Sounding Herstory

The first thing to note about Marcia Douglas’s novel, *The Marvellous Equations of the Dread: A Novel in Bass Riddim*, is its subtitle. The term “riddim” is a stylization of the word “rhythm” in Jamaican vernacular. Its usage in the subtitle indicates the novel’s formal complexity; that it is, to use another vernacular phrase, “a trip,” meaning an exciting or unusual experience, as with psychedelic induced hallucination, but also in the Black vernacular sense of behaving in a crazy or irrational way. As such, *Marvellous* is a novel that carries you through time and space on a journey into sound.<sup>5</sup> The text has been defined in various generic terms pointing out its similarities to magical realism, speculative fiction, and historical fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Sound shows up in *Marvellous* to help us imagine alternative, non-traditional ways to configure history or *historying*. Historiography in this context gestures towards open-ended-ness that moves us in turn towards a concept of feminist time in which past, present, and future overlap and are indistinguishable from each other; and this I name *herstoriography*.<sup>7</sup> Herstoriography undermines the linearity and perceived coherence of Western historiography by re/moving said boundedness. Using sound as the basis of its critique of historiography, *Marvellous* displaces the scribal/graphic as a privileged form of knowledge retention and circulation. Therefore, to enact herstoriography, the novel’s form

invokes sound as part of this critical intervention. It does so by drawing on various sonic metaphors such as re-mix, bass, version, and dub. This article focuses primarily on the novel's use of dub aesthetics, both metaphorically and materially. Effectively, by writing dub, *Marvellous* shows up the insufficiency of writing and language to bear, fully encompass, and express Caribbean histories, therefore, staging its own quarrel with history.

### Re-mixing History

Douglas's *Marvellous* charts a quest that follows an undead Bob Marley as he re-enters Babylon to try and recover his prized Judah ring, the thing he needs to enter Zion, the afterlife. Along the way, even before we encounter Marley, we are carried through moments in Jamaica's fractured and dis/connected histories constituted by stories from alive and un-dead characters related in some way to Marley. The novel's first section, titled "The Re-mix," situates its methodological approach to historiography. Adapting and using parts from an originary text, re-mix as a sonic process/practice manipulates old texts to create new ones.<sup>8</sup> Embedded in the new text is a simultaneous gesturing towards both what has preceded it and that which is now re/created. Re-mixing adapted to a writing practice enables the possibility of ongoing and open-ended discourse that keeps a text open to interpretation and, more important, to expansion. Assuming *Marvellous* to be historical fiction, it leverages re-mix as a historiographical method that is less concerned with making its fiction elements feel "believable"<sup>9</sup> as an altogether new text, and in doing so, calls into question the history that it fictionalizes or the history that is the basis of its fiction.

The novel's rendition of "New World" "discovery" is told from the vantage point of an indigenous Taino woman whose observations and thoughts are reported by a third person omniscient narrator. The woman is placed in 1494 "Xaymaca," the indigenous name for the island of Jamaica, which is both a setting (time and place) and an organizing concept (philosophy) of the novel. The assertion of the island's indigenous name situates us in a time before time, in which the latter time refers to a beginning calculated by on the terms of Western conquest.<sup>10</sup> Recalling Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea is History" (2007), this re-mix foregrounds the Taino woman and her tribal memory that have been denied a place in History, as there have been no monuments to commemorate her existence or significance. Thus, the presence of a Taino woman narrator upends prevailing representations of arrival to the island and the region that have been routinely circulated (and believed) from the vantage point of Europeans on ships. The omniscient narrator offers an objectivity long absent from dominant Eurocentric accounts of exploration and discovery. This re-mix approach, therefore, works to reorient the reader in multiple ways. Foremost, it does so by

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subverting vantage points, literally, with the placement and female gendering of the observer who witnesses this consequential arrival from ‘an-other’ side, or from the view of the Other.

As a metaphor, “re-mix” throws into question sight as the only basis of witnessing. The Taino woman observer at the beginning of the novel urges readers by saying: “Listen, children,” an imperative for us to activate ‘an-other’ sense as we try to put the past to use in a way that guides our navigation of the uncertain future that she foresees (Douglas 2016, 9). The imperative “listen,” not “watch” or “look,” decenters our visual orientation to witnessing. Seeing and listening, or sight and sound are put in tension where hearing modifies or enhances seeing. Katherine McKittrick’s (2016) work on Black feminist geographies and her articulation of place and social relations helps us understand how mapping the arrival from the perspective of the island’s indigenous people shifts the mapping of the world that created a Western (ideologically) dominated world. Drawing on McKittrick, I consider how sound—and by extension listening—reorients us by locating the body as a primary site of storying, where time and place (history and geography) collide.<sup>11</sup> Our positionalities have been reinforced by the ways history is constructed and predicated on geographies of domination. McKittrick theorizes that the very ideas of the West and Western history must be in relation to other places and other structures of time. Additionally, the ways sight/vision lock (in) place and space (site) and knowledge (cite) are displaced by the imperative to listen: a different way of inhabiting space and being in relation with each other.

### Dub Sound

Michael Veal’s ethnographic study on dub, “show[s] the extent to which this music [...] is in fact a potent metaphor for the society and times within which it emerged” (2007, 2). Veal focuses on the creation of the dub sound and music to advance a social critique. By reflecting on the creative process behind dub, I posit ways that dub form influences, or as Alexander G. Weheliye puts it, “fruitfully [contaminates]” written form (2005, 8). I ask, how might the sound structure of dub influence writing as a practice towards its own creative and critical ends?

Dub, derived from reggae, is an articulation and an expression of the bass (riddim). Whereas the bass, sonically, is the utterance, it also makes space for different styles or articulations of that utterance, or “a new [musical] language” (Veal 2007, 36).

This article’s first epigraph clarifies the relationship between dub and version as a matter of naming; dub is versioning as dub is used to create versions. The ways in which Veal dissects the deconstructed structure of dub music vis-à-vis the process of production helps map how stylistic elements of dub can guide us through a fragmented text such as *Marvellous*.<sup>12</sup> Dub influences the novel’s

engagement with history and specifically the ways Douglas enacts a writing of history that also writes the body (story making that is somatic). Thus, the novel adapts the musical form of dub into writing and that enables a critique of historiography in its features of disruption, repetition, incantation, and broken words.

Dub as a sound concept disrupts and remakes rhythm, and is an expression of a dialect in an articulation of time (consider the sound of a clock marking time's passing – tick, tock). Specifically, dub as a dialect counters Time – time that is marked by the bass (instrument and sound), upon the base (the foundation of the music). One of the key features of dub, or the primary way it recomposes time, is through its fragmented structure that is sounded by echo and the expansion via reduplication of the original sound object. To explain how this process of fracturing and re/constituting is a signature of the dub sound, Veal writes: "...[T]he dub mix is a version of a preexisting song that allows fragments of its prior incarnations to remain audible as an obvious part of the final product" (2007, 21). In other words, as part of the process of re/composition enabled at the bass/base, dub expands time like the anatomy of an echo, or how that sound travels. The sound wave starts from *a here*, goes to *a there*, and from there returns dispersed to here. Speaking temporally, it travels from present to future, and back to present that is now past. Such a confounding of time in the novel destabilizes tenets of historiography towards a feminist orientation, or herstorigraphy. Feminist here refers both to a decentering of the so-called 'rationale' that is organized by the Western, patriarchal order, and woman-centered perspective.

### Literary Versioning<sup>13</sup>

"Version," synonym for dub, is the remapping of a record, or the reinscribing of something new onto a preexisting musical foundation. Rachel Moseley-Wood defines "version" as "basically the modification of a popular song, and hundreds of different versions may follow the release of a single record, each slightly different from the original" (2015, 30, 31). Evelyn O'Callaghan argues dub/version undermines the notion of an origin/al and privileges the possibility of "a plethora of meanings" in which no version rises in significance above others (quoted in Moseley-Wood 2015, 31).

Thus, in *Marvellous*, "version" operates at the levels of organization, discourse, and form in the novel and its feminist orientation is announced with an observer who is narrated: a Taino woman witnessing the arrival of European settlers. This shift in the perspective of what was previously circulated as the beginning of Caribbean history is a re-mix, as the section is titled, of the historical narrative of the island and the region, which is typically told from the perspective of white, male colonizers, "the white man on deck" (Douglas 2016, 9). In addition,

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the Taino woman's presence foregrounds an indigenous knowledge specific to different perceptions/interpretations of time and space.

Despite the narrative of conquest and overdetermination that already decided the future of the island, the region, and all its non-white inhabitants, the Taino woman foretells that "the island [...] will not be moved" (Douglas 2016, 9). This foretelling is informed by her visions of the future in which she witnessed the arrival of these ships. The emphasis on the response—resistance—of the island as opposed to the people who inhabit it, suggests that it is the land or connection to the land that bestows on the people a similar will to resist. In this framing, a connection to land and nature will be significant and necessary for future acts of resistance. Effectively, the people draw their strength from the land—the land serves as a base or bass. We can read being 'grounded' in this sense relates to both steadfastness—a position, a perspective—and standing in position, on guard. Thus, disconnection from the land would signify a separation from the knowledge power of the land. Being no longer grounded, in these terms, would be to fall(down) or become fallen.

The third person omniscient narrator transitions to the first first-person narrator, Leenah, a deafmute Rasta woman whose narration recurs most throughout the remainder of the novel. Beginning the novel's second section, "Version," Leenah announces her steering of one narrative. We might be tempted to look to Leenah as a guide through the novel. We can also think of the sonic resemblance between her name Leenah and "linear"—to progress sequentially. Leenah is also referred to as "Zion dawta," a daughter of Zion. She is tasked with guiding Bob Marley on his quest to enlightenment, to find Zion, because of her ability to navigate between various interstices.

As a deafmute, Leenah feels sound in and with her body. She feels vibrations, a connection with earth, nature, and the elements, and she is also able to feel speech. She has a synesthetic knowledge wherein she experiences seeing as tasting and feeling as hearing. Communicating with Bob, she describes "Reading [his] lips is like eating wild guava," and feels "his voice in [her] palm" (Douglas 2016, 17). When she "speaks" with her body through sign-language, her "hands make reggae" and "moved like music" (2016, 51, 30). She recalls her grandfather Hector's voice as sounding like "woodsmoke and Job's tears," alluding to both smell and touch (2016, 68). She fashions her own language, a sign language, that she names "Deafooman." Leenah's means of communication rely on varied sensory intersections and crossovers. However, rather than valorizing deafness as a superhuman ability, the novel situates Leenah's deafness to suggest that when one possibility of sensory experience is foreclosed or taken from us, we might realize alternatives ways of embodied knowledge. In which, quiet and stillness can position us for different ways of knowing.

Leenah, who hears only in her dreams, parallels the Taino woman who gets visions of the future in her dreams and who also hears from the future beyond the horizon of the sea. The dream world or other world, then, signifies a place of a higher consciousness where hearing is the sense which grants access to knowledge. Leenah's identity as a Rastafari and her connection to the past is evidenced in the visual marker of Rasta—one's dreads—which are taken as "transmitters to the ancestors," anchoring and affirming connections/connectors to the past (Douglas 2016, 17). Not unlike the roots of the much-mythologized ceiba-silk cotton trees on the island which "converse underground" and "[hold] communion with the ancestors" (2016, 116, 140). Leenah's dreads are an embodied symbol of that same rootedness to the past through the land.

Given the violent circumstances of Leenah's hearing-loss,<sup>14</sup> it is more accurate to say her sense of hearing was taken, not lost. The threat of being overheard, to Leenah's attackers, suggests that at least to them hearing is as significant a form of witnessing as seeing in that it can validate or corroborate events/things that happen. As Leenah says, "Stories are that way. In the little districts of Jamaica, they travel and reverb for generations" (2016, 44). Storytelling and orality, for some cultures, is how history gets circulated and reproduced. Hearing enables us to repeat a story that, because of our connectedness, can travel through time and space; not being able to hear, in turn, can (re)produce a type of silencing.

However, rather than being a deficit, Leenah's lack of hearing reduces noise—interference and distraction—and gives her keener perceptive abilities. Thus, because she can no longer hear, she is forced to listen, in the Barthesian sense. Leenah states, "Deaf-life had made me a standing tree"—perhaps a ceiba silk-cotton tree (Douglas 2016, 30). Leenah may not be able to hear at the frequency at which hearing humans can detect sound, but her allusion to being a standing tree, recalls the roots of the cotton trees that are conduits to the past that vibrates up through the root and "the bass-line that pulsates along the faults of [the] island" which Leenah names at the beginning of her version (2016, 13). Thus, Leenah embodies the bassline/baseline knowledge of a female/feminine perspective.

The trope of a tree, upright and rooted, recurs in the novel as a symbol of a subterranean connection to home, the past, and to history. Leenah's heightened sensory perceptiveness extends beyond the confines of the natural world and into a way of being in the world that relies on a higher consciousness rooted in bodily knowledge and presence. Leenah embodies a confounding of the senses, or how we understand the senses to apprehend the world. Her self-comparison to a tree and nature is also a call back to the vision of the Taino woman who understands a connection to nature and its elements as sources of knowingness. In other words, in the absence of one ability (or two, since as a result of her deafness she

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no longer speaks) Leenah is guided towards other ways of finding balance. Leenah's deafness allows us to ponder: what might we gain or learn (how to do) if we could tune out the noise and other disturbances around us? Leenah, because of her deafness can "listen [...] with her heart" and feel pure sound as vibrations transmitted from the land to/through her body (2016, 52).

Significantly, Leenah can trace her lineage to Africa as she is named for her great-grandmother, Murlina, the "Guinea woman," who stowed away from Cuba to Jamaica in 1892, which is also the year of Emperor Haile Selassie's birth (hereafter referred to as HIM) (2016, 63). The timing of Murlina's arrival is another example of how histories (that we might consider great and small) intertwine and coincide within the novel. When Murlina is rescued ashore with her partner and son, Hector, she identifies themselves, breaking English, as "I and I" (2016, 63).<sup>15</sup> "I and I" within Rastafarian discourse signifies an expression of oneness, unity, and being-in-common-with; effectively, a restructuring of the plural subject and object pronouns "we" and "us." However, it also replaces the singular object pronoun, "me," as a way of asserting one's own subjectivity expressly against oppressive structures that would render one an object, denying personhood and humanity. For Murlina, affirming "I and I," is a repudiation of systems of colonialism and enslavement, and in this particular moment a gender equalizing statement; we, man and woman, are both "I." That she does so in another and new language, in what might be read as a failure of translation, is also to rename herself and her partner according to her own will in this moment of change or transition.

Leenah learns her history and inheritance through stories that circulate within her family, from the women of her family. This tradition of voicing and recalling the past is projected in Leenah's name, a derivative of Murlina recognizable more in a sonic register than a scribal; Leenah is now an "I" connected to Murlina. Their connection is a genetic sonic trait, too, as Leenah's voice, it is noted, before she stopped speaking, resembled her mother's "only a little bit softer," and her grandmother's, "only higher" (2016, 62). Voice in the relationships between the three women serves as inherited sound, a propensity to willfulness, feminist agency, and autonomy.

### Bass Riddim

"Bass Riddim," noted in the novel's subtitle, attunes us to the sonic between the present and past, and more specifically, between our own connections to the ancestral. The novel refers to the "bass-line that pulsates along the faults of the island" and the "[b]ass riddim [that] moves underground and the sea [that] lurches, dragging flotsam, broken shells, and ground hipbones" (Douglas 2016, 13). The pulsating bass-line signifies an energy or force that lives within the land



from the presence and remains of ancestors that are still there. The “flotsam, broken shells, and ground hipbones,” carry and hold traces of bodies thrown from slave ships and of the surviving enslaved who would later die (2016, 13). The rhythm of the waves and the roots of the cotton tree that vibrate, “converse underground” and “[hold] communion with the ancestors” all constitute the bass riddim (Douglas 2016, 116, 140).

Bass is central to reggae music. In the composition of reggae, the bass’s rhythm is situated as a sonic disruptor and, more importantly, one that makes room for the emergence of counter rhythms, counter narratives, or versions. Similarly, this novel utilizes “bass riddim” to make room for a “precise, syncopated” representation of histories; one in which, again, the past is not past, but very much alongside and structuring of the present and towards futurity (Bradley 2000, 158). The notion of time’s inter-existential nature— with past, present, and future being indistinguishable from each other—according to the novel, is made apprehensible by our attentiveness to other sonic markers, like vibrations.

## Writing Dub

The materiality of sound and sound’s capacity to counteract the accepted order of things is the bass riddim that forms the basis of the novel’s argument. This is exemplified in the section titled, “The Exchange,” in which Marley and Negus, the falldown (a fallen angel), exchange bodies. This takes place at the base of the Half Way Tree clock tower (see Figure 1) (Douglas 2016, 84). In the space of the bass riddim, where the bass functions as a “precise and flexible instrument,” time flattens and the living and the (un)dead commune (Bradley 2000, 309).<sup>16</sup> I claim that these images— rather than reifying the written word as the best mode of transmission—show how the novel uses form to complicate that very presumption. Furthermore, our attempts to elicit sound from these images (that is, not the sound of the words) replicates the phenomenon of experiencing one sense through another.

There are a few things worth noting in (the image of) the text in Figure 1 (see below) This exchange takes place on October 26, 1981, several months after Marley’s death on May 11 of that same year. Marley “rides” an “underground bass [...] riddim” back to Zion to recover the Judah ring (Douglas 2016, 14). The exchange occurs on a frequency of 20Hz, the lowest frequency detectable by the human ear—a sound that enters the ear as low as a hum, a vibration, in bass. It is therefore a sound one must listen for, with a particular consciousness, to detect. Passive engagement is insufficient. The typeset of the text signifies a bass tone in contrast to an assumed reading voice of conventional typesetting. Contrary to the

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way we interpret bold lettering—as loudness—in this instance, since we are given the frequency of the event, bold lettering signifies force.

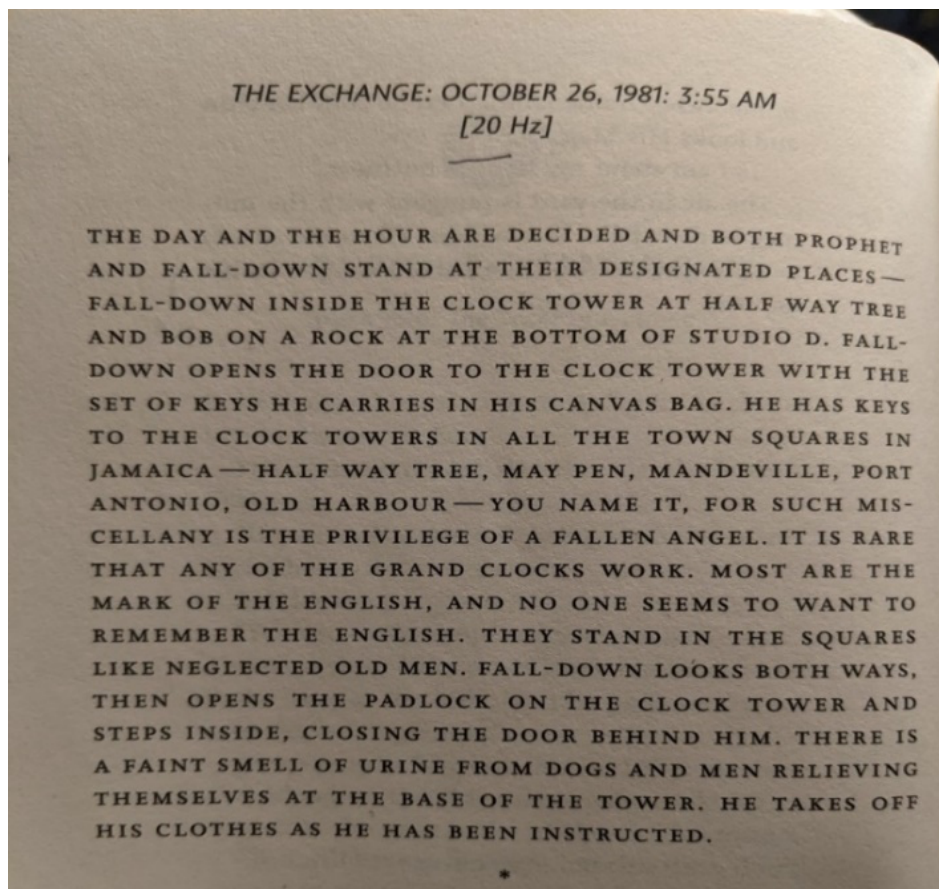


Figure 1. An image of the section titled “The Exchange” in Douglas’s *Marvellous* (2016, 84). Note the all-caps typeset.

In other words, the typesetting signifies energy, not volume. Written in all-caps, evenly sized, the words project a monotone and forceful hum and vibration, that we feel and listen for.

The exchange occurs at the clock tower, one of many such relics on the island that rarely tells (the correct) time. Yet, the event is registered at the time stamp of 3:55 a.m., which is nearing the end of the witching hour, between three and four in the morning. Supernatural time, in other words, is the one that haunts the clock built over a silk cotton tree cut down in 1912, and “before the clock tower, there was a tree [...] They cut it down in 1912 for an English king” (Douglas 2016, 208). The mystic beliefs surrounding cotton trees on the island are connected to the ways silk cotton tree roots transverse time and space. Literally, the deeper the roots run the more likely it is that they are underneath the whole island. That is one aspect of the significance of the exchange taking place in the clock tower. Another aspect is the vibrations that carry from and are carried by

the tree's roots which were alluded to earlier in this chapter. Those vibrations signify an ancestral presence (energy) that is another type of haunting, specifically as the silk cotton tree that once stood at the Half Way Tree mark was where a slave boy was hung in X.<sup>17</sup> As place of perpetual haunting, the clock tower is also a place of "anti-[clock] time" (2016, 195).

The content of the text, too, informs us that the clock tower is a portal to the other side, Studio D, or the Dub-side. The place of exchange therefore is a direct channel between Babylon (here) where Negus waits and the dub side (there) where Marley waits. The location of other similar clock towers is also mentioned: "May Pen, Mandeville, Port Antonio, Old Harbor [...]" identifies locations all over the island and the networks of connections through the monuments of imperialism intended to surmount a preexisting natural order (Douglas 2016, 84). The reappropriation of the clock towers, through the activation of the silk cotton tree roots, symbolizes an uprising that usurps colonial and imperial powers and systems that have that underwrite time-keeping and history-making. Indeed, most of the "GRAND CLOCKS [...] ARE THE MARKS OF THE ENGLISH, AND NO ONE SEEMS TO WANT TO REMEMBER THE ENGLISH" (2016, 84). So, on the outside the clock towers resemble relics, like "NEGLECTED OLD MEN", and symbolize archaic philosophies of Western thought (2016, 84).

However, on the inside, the bass riddim from the cotton tree roots posits advantages of sensing as a broad, inclusive, dynamic concept. One must listen to apprehend the low bass of 20Hz, and thus, listening and feeling displace seeing as the dominant sense. The clocks as objects in the center of town squares that project time emphasize a preoccupation with sight and seeing. The auditory tenets of bass inscribed in the form of the text push against this tendency. In other words, where a clock tower, a large and imposing object incline us to see time, at its base ("the base of mother-ticking Babylon") there is much to be gained from listening and feeling (Douglas 2016, 134). This recalls the significance of the body in knowledge making, in the way the Taino woman instructs us to listen, and the way Leenah herself listens. Thus, in this section we are directed to the feminist orientation of versioning an event that displaces time even while it is logged by date and time. We are directed to consider how instead of a when.

## **The Dub-Side: Studio D**

Focusing on the first and last "DUB-SIDE CHANTING" tracks, I explore how, through dub's influence on writing, the form modifies historical content by what it expresses about the construction of time. If a Western construct of time is how we understand and organize history, what happens when time as such is stopped, suspended, or interrupted? Or, to ask invoking the symbol of the clock tower (a

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portal from the Dub-side to Babylon), what happens when an instrument or tool used to tell time no longer has (a) time to tell?

The concept of time and its relationship to space is taken up in “DUB-SIDE CHANTING” tracks in the novel that take place in “Studio D,” the Dub-side. Effectively, the Dub-side is where there is “simultaneously a midair suspension and firm grounding” that represents a space of infinite possibility because of the sensory disruptions that occur there (Douglas 2016, 32). The emphasis on chanting as continuous repetition will be examined later in this section. Taking as examples the novel’s first and last Dub-side scenes, these disruptions destabilize the notion of linearity that undergirds Western time-keeping and history-recording. In addition, these representations of/on the Dub-side integrate “pseudo” scientific lenses, which offer us multiple ways to make meaning of or read into what occurs there.

In music production, the dub side is also known as the B-side, the under-side of the A-side, the record’s intended main text. It is on the Dub-side plain of existence that the undead HIM, Bob Marley, and Negus interact. As mentioned before, the Dub-side is a place of suspended time that resembles both Elysium and purgatory which lies in-between Babylon (Kingston) and Zion. It is the portal connected to the Half Way Tree clock through which Marley and Negus travel back and forth between Babylon and Zion. That the Dub-side is connected to the clock tower, where in the land of the living time has faltered, also adds to its air of mystery and enchantment. On the Dub-side, Marley is bald and HIM is toothless, two realities that are unimaginable in the realm of the living, the A-side, where the legends of these men persist untarnished (Douglas 2016, 20). The novel activates the Dub-side as not an imagined, imaginary, or unimaginable space that is in opposition to (the A-side). It is another version of a reality that is credible insofar as one can expand the mind, the consciousness away from conventional ways of thinking, and discard preconceptions in order to partake of the experiences there.

There are eight “DUB-SIDE CHANTING” tracks in the novel, which occur out of numerical sequence. In which, the first track is Track 12.0, the second is 13.0, the third is 16.0, the fourth is 11.0, and so on. The tracks begin to appear in the section titled “Version” and they mostly document encounters between Marley and HIM—from Marley’s initial arrival to various times he returns to give HIM an update on his quest to find the Judah ring. It is worth emphasizing here that although the tracks appear out of sequence, interspersed between other chapters with no discernible pattern, we are still following these non-linear accounts. Which is to say, even in the (out of) order the tracks occur, we read across the gaps and against linearity because the fragmented storytelling cohere to tell a story. This is instructive in that it reminds us that historying is narrativization according to a motive. The pages of the Dub-side tracks have

wider than usual margins and thus the words appear funneled. The tracks seem contained, held in, encased, as though there is more discipline and focus required to read into the Dub-side.<sup>18</sup>

On the Dub-side, the other side of the “natural” world, the supernatural shapes the order of things. When Marley arrives to the Dub-side (Track 12.0), it looks familiar to him as a place he has been to before, “in a half silence while smoking a spliff, at the bottom of a river dream,” and possibly when he was in a hallucinatory, altered mind state (Douglas 2016, 19). Thus, hallucinations are authenticated in this space, not as being out of mind, but as a means by which to see—and know—beyond the confines of the physical world or the A-side. Veal notes a feature of dub music is that it conveys the “contemplative dreaminess of pop psychedelia” (2007, 8). Expanding on this idea, Veal quotes Eliche Goode on the centrality of marijuana to artistic production when he describes dub music as “a glorification of the irrational and seemingly nonsensical, an abandonment of traditional and ‘linear’ reasoning sequences and the substitution of ‘mosaic’ and fragmentary lines of attack, and bursts of insights rather than chains of thought” (quoted in Veal 2007, 80). Indeed, as Marley takes stock of the scene upon his arrival all his senses are activated and heightened. It is described as follows:

He lands on his feet, blinks in the star apple light, sees a house with a kerosene lamp in the window, an old man outside peeling sugar cane [...] a nutmeg tree; a dog barks from behind the house [...] Marley reaches for the cup, the taste at first, as ordinary as St. Ann rain [...] the quench opens his Rastafareye (Douglas 2016, 20-21).

Here, Marley not only sees where he is, he hears, and tastes it, too. In this instance, there is a comingling of the senses that is, yet again, a precondition for accessing higher consciousness and greater knowledge. The Dub-side, then, is a site of the magical or “marvellous,” an overwhelming of the senses, and a state of altered perception where—third eye open— one becomes primed to receive insight and wisdom. Thus, it is where Marley is transported to meet with HIM and be given the instructions (or knowledge) he needs to find Zion. However, while he imagines Zion as a place of eternal refuge and the antithesis of Babylon, when he returns to search for the Judah ring, he discovers like Hector that Zion is not where he expected. Instead, he finds, “Zion is a place inside,” or a state of mind (Douglas 2016, 192).

On the final DUB-SIDE CHANTING track, “On the Far Side of I & I,” Marley having been successful in his search for the Judah ring tells HIM he gifted the ring to “a dawta reading a book” to which HIM replies: “It will be safe there. Books have a way of preserving things” (Douglas 2016, 273), suggesting women as protectors of knowledge (the book) and divine wisdom (the ring). The characters of the reading “dawta,” the Taino woman and Leenah are sistrens—a sisterhood—who serve as guardians of history, herstorio-graphers, keepers of

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“woman time” (2016, 196). HIM’s affirmation that books can also be trusted sites of preservation seems to suggest that the indigenous and traditional can co-exist—with the Judah ring as a source of magic and point of access to another world being protected by women who read books, sources of “traditional” knowledge. Indeed, in articulating the transformative qualities of dub music, Veal writes, “at their most radical, the textural and syntactic qualities of the music counteracted the dominance of Westernized musical thinking; ultimately, they helped transform the culture of popular music within the west itself” (2007, 16, 17). That Marley has gifted the enchanted Judah ring to a woman reading a book makes it possible that her reading and understanding of these traditional texts is now inflected by whatever higher consciousness has been bestowed upon her as the new holder of the ring and the keeper of a divine type of knowledge. It is not simply that these two knowledge systems coexist, but that one has necessarily been altered by encountering the other. Such an understanding of how dub music influences the themes of writing illuminates, at least on a symbolic level, the disruptive aims of this novel. The way in which Douglas imagines and represents a relationship to time and space suggests that it is linearity that does not make sense, and therefore writing history in ways that privilege a specific type of order and orientation is restrictive.

Material sound in the novel further underscores the ways that not just writing, but words themselves are insufficient to contain (on the page) histories untold. On the pages that come before and after the final DUB-SIDE CHANTING entry are chants, repetitions of the Yoruba invocation “Ashe”<sup>19</sup> (Douglas 2016, 274). The “Ashe” chant exemplifies what Alexis Pauline Gumbs refers to as “rhythm and riddim, the impact of repetition and the incantatory power of the spoken broken word” (2020, xiii). The riddim of repetition materializes only when the word is voiced and, in its voicing, produces a hypnotic feeling in the speaker that would seem to replicate the hallucinogenic nutmeg smell on the Dub-side. Regarding the page, even at a glance, it is apparent that it is the same word recurring (Collins 2016, 185). It may be tempting to gloss over what is written because a visual scan dulls any anticipation of discovery of new information. The visual representation of repetition on the page is an illusion of disciplining, tidiness, and order. But the illusion is undone in the utterance. That is, to give sound to or recite “ashe,” literally undoes “the silence of the written surface” and removes the material boundedness of the text (quoted in van Maas 2018, 343).

Recitation pulls us into the text in a way that differs from silent reading. In that instance, through the act of utterance, we become part of a text that was previously understood to be complete. To read aloud upends the notion that “the manuscript and the print book have been associated with fantasies of ipseity, of the book itself as an enveloping of totalities [...] of finite or infinite gathering [...] of unity, closure, intactness, sacredness, and so on” (van Maas 2018, 338, 339).

Using our voices to read aloud, we become engaged in authoring part of the text and thus expanding it. With our voices, we become part of the text, become implicated by and in it as narrators of the story.

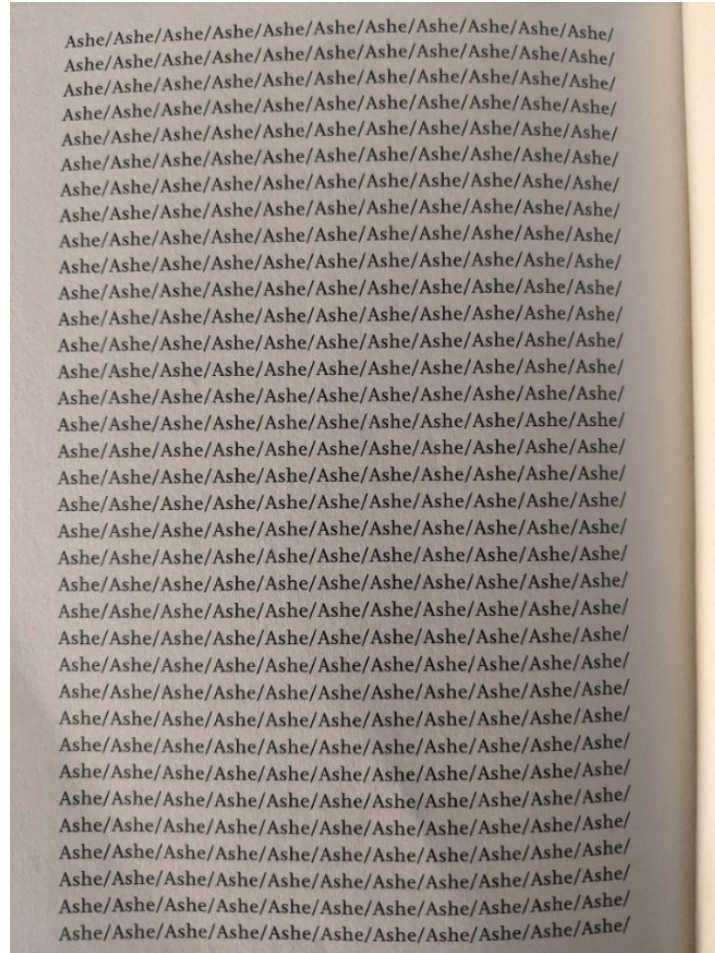


Figure 2. Another image of the novel’s typesetting, this time showing repetition (2016, 274).

There is a sense of being overwhelmed in the repetition of “ashe,” but the back slashes that separate the words invite a break, a breath.<sup>20</sup> These breaks also ensure that with each breath the next iteration of the word will be sounded differently—the same, but different, effectively a revision (re/version) of what has preceded it. Written on the page, although the repeated words seem (appear) monotonous, an incessant looping, in sound with every utterance there is an opportunity to sound oneself out of that loop. “Ashe” is an affirmation of the power to make things happen (“let it be so”), thus its incantatory effect “surpass[es] the one-dimensionality of the original [...] allowing more open-ended opportunities of [...] interpretation” in which “the original,” in this case, refers to the written words on the page (Veal 2007, 66). The voicing of written sound that these two pages elicit displaces the static nature of writing. Further, if

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what we understand as dominant history has been circulated mostly through written texts then, as method, herstory destabilizes that authority by subordinating the written word, in this case to sound.

The murmur, hum, or vibration brings the body back to the text. Also alluded is a pleasure derived from the sensation of reading in the way one feels word's sounds emerge from inside the body, from one's lungs to the tongue, past the teeth and lips to the outside. Therefore, reading or sounding words is something that is done by the body and to the body.<sup>21</sup> This kind of writing for the body is one that invites us to feel, to sense, in ways that disrupt how we traditionally inhabit language particularly in (silent) reading. Experiencing sound coursing through the body is part of the lure of dub music for its audience. Here, the writing replicates that feeling or sensation of hypnotic pleasure and highlights the importance of orality as a form of improvisation, amendment, and adornment as with every new encounter with this text, it gets re-formed.

There are other instances in the novel that elicit speech to produce other sensations that are found in dub music. Images of words that represent echo and reverb, for example, although they do not resemble broken words, exploit the nature of words to be fixed signs. In Figure 3, Marley and Garvey are having a conversation in the clock tower. Garvey encourages Marley to sing as a means of calling the people back to a level of social consciousness that will help guide themselves out of the disaffection of life in Babylon; perhaps to help them, too, in finding Zion. Garvey's last words are caught in a reverb that echoes back to the spirit(ual) home to which he claims Marley's voice provides a portal.

These last two figures are exemplary of what Barthes terms "writing aloud [...] an erotic mixture of timbre and language" from which one derives textual pleasure from reading writing which invites one to read aloud (1976, 66). His is explicitly an embodied experience, which is to say it brings one's body into the writing. To try and replicate the sound of dub, as I claim, is to replicate an entry point into this capacity to feel that counters Western notions of knowledge making that is, again, fixed in language. Returning to Veal, he writes that, dub "has proved particularly useful when its conceptual processes assume the foreground and the music suggests other parameters of thought and experience. The reality is that dub grounds the abstract, experimental impulse in the sensual experience of the body" (2007, 253). We can substitute music for words or writing in that quote to understand how the novel's form achieves similar ends.



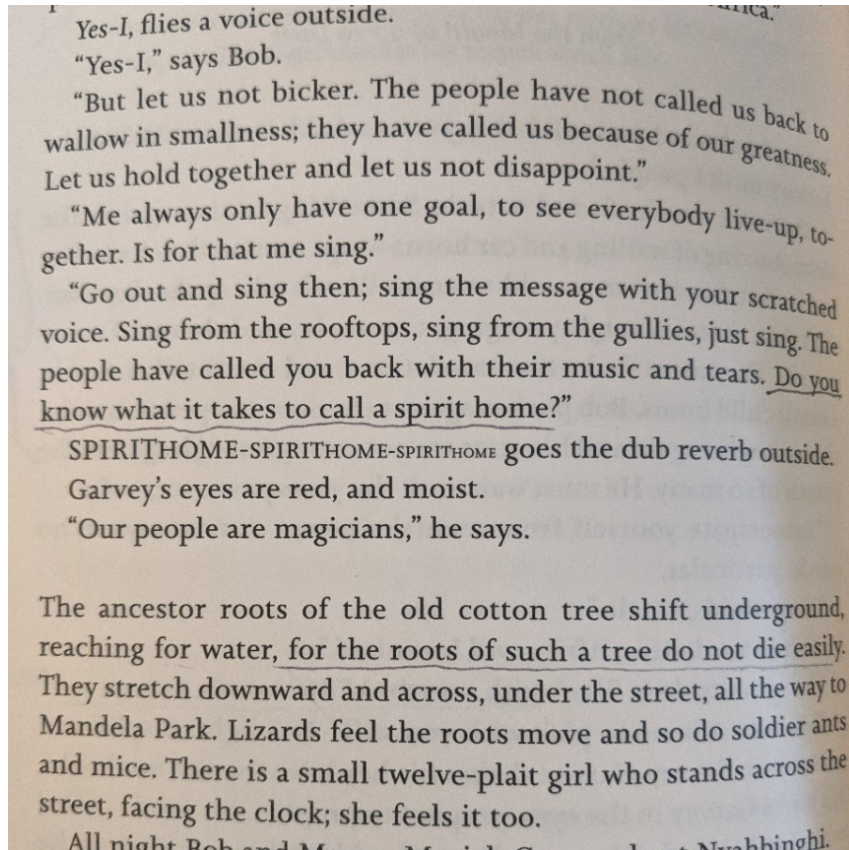


Figure 3. In this final example, the image shows the typesetting is adapted to represent the sound of an echo on the page (2016, 176).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated ways that sound in Caribbean makes use of the sensory possibilities of sound. Tensions between sound and writing, as exemplifying expressions of low-culture and high-culture, respectively, have tended to be worked through dialectically. However, rather than framing the problem as a debate between good object/bad object, or good object/less good object, here, I was interested in showing how, in Caribbean fiction, these two forms of expression (sonic and the written/the phonic and the graphic) interact with each other.

When writing alone does not capture the expressive complexities of Caribbean and black historical and cultural experiences, I suggest authors of Caribbean fiction employ sonic interventions that alter the texture of writing, more so than the content.<sup>22</sup> In Caribbean fiction, written representation of sound is a strategy authors use to counter the hegemony of written language and its attendant claims to epistemic superiority without, as Peter McMurray asserts, “celebrat[ing] writing nor valoriz[ing] orality, its perpetual other, but rather draws

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attention to all the sonic traces that exceed and leak out from the inscriptive capacity of writing” (2017, 262).<sup>23</sup>

I have suggested that dub as formal experimentation can be the basis of critique of traditional methods of historiography or history-making and name the new method “*herstoriography*.” In response to questions of Caribbean history and the history of our origins, formal experiment articulates the region’s own peculiar understanding of its place within a time/space continuum as outside of conventional structures of knowledge. The adaptation of form across creative, artistic genres draws on sound in ways that disturb the belief that writing is a singularly privileged form in which knowledge circulates. I considered how the structural features of the sound such as fragmentation, reverb, and echo play out on the pages and in the story of Douglas’s novel. I argue that her work enacts what I term “dub writing,” drawing on the structure of dub music to suggest how we can imagine new ways to interpret and re/present histories. These creative interventions effectively yield versions of history in much the same way that dub music results from the versioning of an originary text or record. Versions aspire towards destabilizing the rigid nature of linearity that sustain our conception of time and how it structures history. Sound in writing allows Caribbean authors recursively to engage with history, to reframe and remix historical narratives and attempt to fill silent voids in the region’s elusive histories.

In the novel’s final section, “Nyabinghi,” three background singers chant, urging us to “follow the curve of this song, and listen/for where it dubs over...” (Douglas 2016, 279). “Nyabinghi” is significant here for two reasons. First, it harnesses the power of sound or sound power in the force of the chant in communal gathering that is at once devotional, meditational, incantatory, and spiritual. Arguably, these are all precursors to a type of arrival resembling Marley’s quest to Zion, a place inside. Second, Nyabinghi refers and pays homage to Queen Nyabinghi, thereby acknowledging the novel’s orientation towards feminine presence, power, and sensibility. The three background singers, too, perform the task of counter-rhythm and melody that calls our attention to outgrowth from a rhythm of history that has been decidedly masculine and Western. The instructions here are a direct call back to the charge given by the Taino mother, which puts us back at the novel’s beginning. Our only expectation, after we have navigated our way through the text, is to be sent back to listen again—*dubwise*<sup>24</sup>—for where versions might have merged from prior versions to make new ones.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Cooper mentions this excerpt in the interview, “An Insight into Jamaican Music: An Interview with Carolyn Cooper” in SX Salon.

<sup>2</sup> “Western” is used throughout as a metonymy for dominant and hegemonic discourses.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of play is a recurring and layered one in analyses of sound and writing. Play as enjoyment and manipulation is implied in Tinsley's usage here. We can also think of playing music, records, songs; play and replay; play as recreation in not taking books and words too seriously; play as performance; and, playing part in (a discourse, for example).

<sup>4</sup> "Nonhistory," from Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990), speaks to the dislocation of Caribbean people from the idea of a historical origin. To compensate, Caribbean people rely on collective memory, a different mode of history, that is less about establishing origin than it is about marking self-defined experiences.

<sup>5</sup> This references a popular sampled voice snippet used on hip hop tracks, by deejays and sound systems.

<sup>6</sup> In a review of the book for *Believer*, Matt Alston (2019) asks: "Can you remix the historical novel and make it new again?"

<sup>7</sup> My nod to Douglas's spoken word performance piece "Natural Herstory" that is based on excerpts from the novel.

<sup>8</sup> This in comparison to a cover, in which an entire text gets taken up and remade, not remixed. A remix uses fragments and parts of an old text to create something new that will bear a resemblance to the original, whereas a cover inflects the entirety of an existing text.

<sup>9</sup> Believable here is used to denote a type of realism.

<sup>10</sup> Time mapped according to the Julian calendar that gives way to Western timekeeping and consequent historicizing.

<sup>11</sup> According to McKittrick, "Geography's discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space 'just is,' and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which 'just is' not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, but it also seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are" (2006, xi).

<sup>12</sup> Veal focuses on the mechanics of the process of creating dub creation with an emphasis on the machinery, turntables, and sound systems.

<sup>13</sup> Preceding Veal and Weheliye, O'Callaghan posits "version" as a concept metaphor to illustrate how West Indian women writers deploy formal strategies to accommodate the particularities of their gendered experiences. Conceptually, her book, "Woman Version" is indebted to the sonic/musical practice to define the parameters of its critical use, to examine "A new form [that] has grown out of the *process* of altering, supplementing, breaking, echoing, mocking, and playing with that original" (11)

<sup>14</sup> Leenah overheard a murder plot and upon being found out was attacked. Her assailants damaged her ears drums presumably so she could never bear witness to hearing "a wickedness" ever again (Douglas 2016, 137).

<sup>15</sup> I make a distinction here between "broken English" to show more deliberation and autonomy on Murlina's part.

<sup>16</sup> Tracing the genealogy of dub music, Michael Veal writes "[i]f the resounding bass drum of the Kumina traditional healing ceremony was considered sonic "heart strings" that connected the worlds of the living and the dead, the thunderous patterns of the reggae electric bass would similarly serve to reawaken postcolonial Jamaicans to their "dead" past as people of African descent (2007, 35).

<sup>17</sup> Conversations between Marley, Garvey, and other un/dead people happen in the clock tower.

<sup>18</sup> Leroy Sibbles's recollection of Lee Scratch Perry's process in making dub music is akin to close reading, which I suggest is what this tightly contained track is trying to get us to do, to broaden the scope and look in deeply for what we can extract (Bradley 2000).

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<sup>19</sup> “Let it be so,” invoking the power to make things happen. “Chant” here also recalls Marley’s song “Chant Down Babylon” (1999) in which he sings: “With reggae music make we go chant down Babylon [...] music you’re the key [...] Bring the voice of the Rastaman/Communicating to everyone...”

<sup>20</sup> The slashes may denote: a set exclusive conjunction “or,” never be repeated the same way twice, but also a break. (Consider rephrasing this I’m not sure it makes sense!)

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Collins writes, “Even when a text is not recited aloud its silent or murmured reading would necessitate a more consciously subvocalizing during which one would be aware of one’s breathing, the flexions of one’s tongue, and the movements of one’s lips. Doing so one would also be aware of the rhythms and phonemic values of the words. That is, one would “hear” oneself even as one silently “uttered” the text. (2016, 187) Where does this citation end?

<sup>22</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye makes this distinction between content and texture in *Phonographies* (2005), where the former denotes addition and the latter, transformation.

<sup>23</sup> See McMurray’s review (2017) of Ana María Ochoa Gautier’s *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (2014).

<sup>23</sup> Dubwise is a Jamaicanism. “Wise,” a suffix, meaning with respect to or concerning. The word is used as an adjective or adverb to denote a relation to the process of making or the product of dub.

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