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Darkcore: dub's dark legacy in drum 'n' bass culture

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The popular use of the terms “dark” and “darkness” in bass-oriented electronic dance music (EDM) styles, such as grime, dubstep and jungle/drum ‘n’ bass, points to the recontextualisation of the racial category of blackness on the one hand and the dark uncanniness of post-industrial urban space on the other. Acknowledging the influence of dub on a continuum of bass-oriented EDM styles in the UK, I focus on drum ‘n’ bass to show how “dark” discourses within the dub diaspora can be defined as a critical response, firstly, to the ethnocentric demonisation of blackness as the post-colonial Other of modernity, and secondly, to the destructive conditions created by the political economy of the contemporary city where rapidly changing relationships between class, gender and technology determine access to wealth and social prosperity¹. In both senses, desire is conflated with darkness to normalise experiences of being marginalised and disempowered on the basis of ethnicity, subaltern class position and urbanised alienation.

During late-1992 and early-1993, jungle or “jungle techno” developed as a dominant soundtrack for London’s inner city rave scene.² The genre is based on a combination of powerful bass sounds and break-beats that are either synthesised or digitally sampled from existing musical recordings, before being accelerated and looped, whereby, the tempos of drum ‘n’ bass bass-lines are typically half those of its break-beats. As 1993 progressed, the more descriptive term “drum ‘n’ bass” was being used alongside jungle to designate jungle tracks that emphasised the drums and bass as the core elements. As such, drum ‘n’ bass shares its name with a museme in

Jamaican dub, where “drum ‘n’ bass” was used to describe the instrumental, rhythm section of reggae that developed from studio recordings of reggae songs in the early-1970s, to be used for dubbing new melody and vocal lines (Veal 2007).

Since the late-1980s, developments in digital music production like sampling and time-stretching have enabled pre-existing bass-lines from dub records running at around 85 beats-per-minute to be combined with accelerated break-beats running at around 170 beats-per-minute. Simultaneously, in the UK, a familiarity with Jamaican music based on post-war migration from the West Indies contextualised the cultural use of contemporary music production technologies. In particular, the exporting of Jamaica’s dub and reggae sound systems to English cities in the mid-1970s helped to foster a sense of solidarity between black/white identified peoples on the basis of shared working class experiences (Hebdige 1987), thereby facilitating the 1990s development of drum ‘n’ bass.

While the term drum ‘n’ bass continues to be used synonymously with jungle, it has been preferred by some of the music’s practitioners on the basis of the latter term’s supposedly ethnocentric connotations. For Smiley, one half of the production duo Shut Up and Dance, the term “jungle” remains highly charged: “The fact is, it’s got racist connotations, it always has. You watch old films and they say ‘turn off that bloody jungle music!’”.³

Implicit in this interpretation is the use of “jungle” to denigrate the African American rhythms of 1920s Harlem dancehall jazz. While the patrons were largely white, performers were almost exclusively black, pointing to the term’s formation

from a discourse of ethnic Otherness (Bakari 1999). Such fear of “jungle music” is supplemented by a fear of miscegenation: the feeling that African diasporic musical rhythms would seduce white youth into the “dark continent” of a primitive and hitherto repressed sexuality. Mary Ann Doane shows how the “dark continent trope is hence invoked in the context of a return to the motifs of castration, lack, and envy” (1991: 210).

Conversely, drum ‘n’ bass practitioners often point to the Jamaican usage of “jungle” to signify the sharing of cultural and socio-economic experiences of young people living and growing up across the Atlantic. In this context, the conscious internalisation of a position of “darkness” locates drum ‘n’ bass membership within what Imruh Bakari refers to as a “subaltern discourse” of post-colonial experience (1999: 109). Bakari argues that since the 1960s, Jamaican music, aesthetics and language have resonated with British working class Afro-Caribbean, ethnic Irish and other white youth who share similar experiences of social exclusion, unemployment and poor educational opportunities in the rapidly de-industrialising regions of cities like London, Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester. As such, the established network of sound systems, all-night clubs and pirate radio stations informed by dub practices in the UK’s inner cities can be seen as attempts to affirm legitimate forms of identity from within the margins of everyday British life, rather than a desire to overcome an assumed “lack of identity” (Bakari 1999: 109). In drum ‘n’ bass, dance event flyers and record sleeves often feature Jamaican and Rastafarian imagery, such as gold and green colours of the Jamaican flag on the Dread Recordings label’s “Dub Dread” series of compilation LPs and the image of the Conquering Lion (see fig. 1). The “king of the jungle” serves as a pervasive signifier of majestic power and mystical

righteousness prevalent in the Rastafarian-inflected narratives of dub and reggae sound system culture. The adoption of such an image in the context of UK drum ‘n’ bass points to Gilroy’s reading of W. E. B Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness” in Black Atlantic culture; the double meaning of the “urban jungle” as a “dread” space of sinful transgression (1993: 77) takes place at the same time that participation in jungle music is constructed as providing divine strength and inspiration.



Figure 1: A representation of the “Conquering Lion” on the record sleeve for “Fire”, by Prizna featuring The Demolition Man (1995).

Kevin Robins and Frank Webster argue that fatalism constitutes a main attitude to life and future prospects in the post-industrial city, whereby “difficult and often painful experiences are integral to urban living” (1999: 258). Thereby, the thematic

prominence of darkness within drum 'n' bass culture points to how it is informed by the post-industrial conditions of its development. A fatalistic outlook permeates the foreboding ambience of early tracks like "Valley Of The Shadows" by Origin Unknown (1993), which features a female voice intoning, "I felt that I was in this long dark tunnel" alongside a menacing, dub-influenced bass-line. During its early development between 1992 and 1994, darkcore and dark were often used synonymously with jungle and drum 'n' bass as descriptive categories for this burgeoning style of uptempo EDM.

Ken McLeod argues that futuristic themes exhibited by popular cultural texts "deflect the often darkly rational, scientific, and sometimes militaristic notions of progress that have characterised much of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century life" (2003: 337). Mary Ann Doane (1991) claims that the recurrence of post-human imagery in popular culture is based to a considerable extent on the success of dystopian science-fiction films like *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron; 1984; US), *Robocop* (dir. Paul Verhoeven; 1987; US) and *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott; 1982; US). According to Lavender III, the protagonists of *The Terminator*, *Robocop* and *Blade Runner* correspond to three specific kinds of synthetic being, respectively the AI (Artificial Intelligence), the cyborg (cybernetic organism) and the android (2011: 191). The AI-endowed robot, the cyborg and the android, act as signifiers for the fear that humanity is in danger of becoming entirely absorbed into a future in which technology has become the paradigm by which progress is measured. For Lavender III, the cyborg in particular constitutes a key category of the representation of post-human identity in science fiction texts, and "refers to a biological-mechanical synthesis between human and machine wherein normal biological capability is

enhanced by electromechanical devices that disrupt the boundary between nature and technology” (2011: 191).⁴ The record sleeve for the *Deep Cover* mini LP by The Guyver (Reinforced 1995) dramatically articulates this boundary disruption in the form of a dreadlocked cyborg MC, thereby reframing the familiar figure (at least to Londoners) of the urban Rastafarian in a futuristic context (see fig. 2). This fascination with the cyborg can be seen to have developed out of a sense of paranoia about the post-industrial displacement of human labour by cybernetics and information technologies, and the political and corporate power structures that seem to legitimate their destructive social effects in urban environments. In this context, drum ‘n’ bass culture transforms dub’s visual iconography to construct the future as “dread time”.

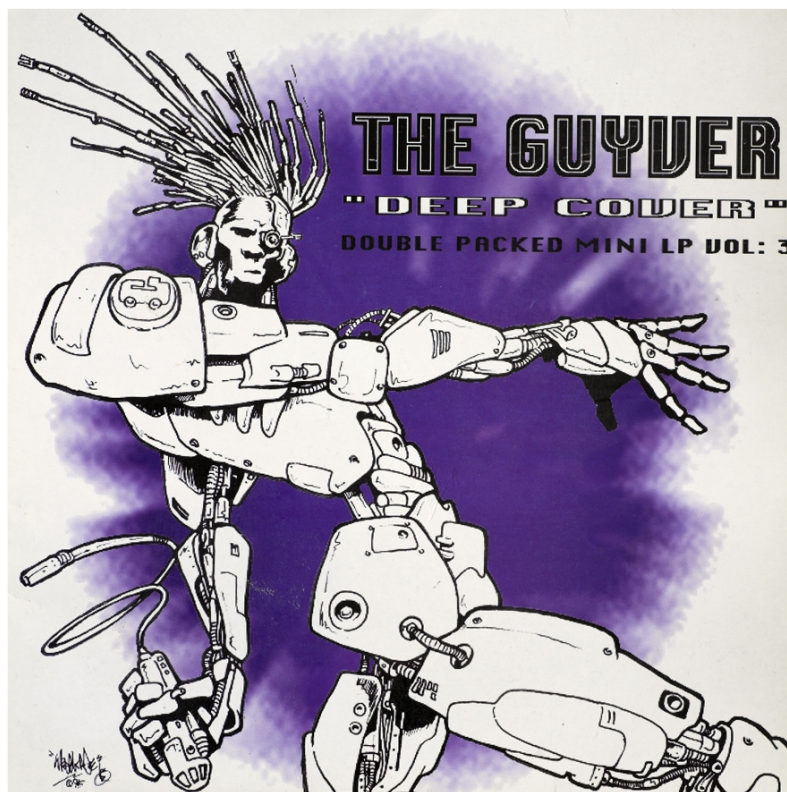


Figure 2: *Deep Cover* mini LP by The Guyver (1995)

The adoption of dub's powerful basslines provides one of main sonic signifiers for drum 'n' bass' dark futurism. For Hebdige, the bassline provides "the basic background throb of reggae's heartbeat" (1987: 82). Within the history of reggae's opposition to institutional and colonial authority (Gilroy 2002), this heartbeat has arguably evolved into an oppositional signifier. Descriptions of the "rebel bass", or "Dread Bass" in Black Atlantic music discourse have served to contextualise its threatening sonority, framing Phil Tagg's view that low frequency sound in Western culture typically signifies darkness and fear (2000: 173-9). The bassline may also be read as an articulation of the painful passage of migration that connects vast geographic and historical distances. As Iain Chambers argues with reference to the work of dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, "bass history is a *hurting* black story" (my italics, 1985: 161). The double meaning of bass as indicating both heartbeat and hurting can also be used to convey the dark uncanniness of post-industrial culture, especially for male bodies previously fortified by the need for physical strength in interactions with the technologies of heavy industry. Cybernetics and other new technologies render the working class male impotent of his "natural" physical power, and hence, his once privileged social position. Yvonne Tasker claims that, in the shift from an industrial society of production to a post-industrial society based on consumption, technological development facilitates the "denaturalising of the supposed naturalness of male identity" (2004: 110). In both post-colonial and post-industrial contexts, hurting bass frequencies articulate feelings of subjective and shared embattlement, generating a sense of masculine re-embodiment via what Steve Goodman calls the "bass materialism" of music strongly influenced by Jamaican sound system culture, whereby a "rearrangement of the senses" is an effect of the collective "processing of vibration" on the dance-floor (2010: 28). While the heavily

amplified bassline marks the indebtedness of drum 'n' bass to Caribbean music, it is also useful in this regard to examine bass in its *hurting* as an inscription of a crisis of masculinity in a late-capitalist context.

The ways in which the development of jungle and drum 'n' bass drew from the sonic, visual and lexicological legacy of dub can be seen as one important response from a largely multi-ethnic and working class demographic in London, and, later, other metropolitan regions of the UK, to the considerable social and cultural changes brought about by the shift in the UK from an industrial to a post-industrial society in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, dub's dread discourse and narratives of spiritual righteousness continue to be adopted to reframe the "dark continent" as a reminder of modernity's colonial dark side while also signifying the inevitable reality of life in the urban jungle. In this way, the ethnocentric connotations linking darkness to blackness are recontextualised and co-opted as an aspect of diasporic cultural practice. In sonic terms, drum 'n' bass borrows dub's foreboding dread bass to articulate a narrative of the future as a new dark, dystopian, age; an apparently inevitable period during which working class masculinity is disempowered and denaturalised by electronic technology and rapid economic change, while narrating a migratory history of African diasporic hurt wrought by displacement and deindustrialisation.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper draws on the author's PhD research project into the politics of speed in drum 'n' bass culture, entitled *Renegade Hardware: Speed, Pleasure and Cultural Practice in Drum 'n' Bass Culture*, undertaken at London South Bank University between 2005 and 2009. Participant comments referred to in this paper were taken from interviews conducted with DJs and producers, along with club and rave audience members during this time.

² See Reynolds (2013: 293-314) for a summary of Jamaican cultural practices in the formation of jungle.

³ Smiley, interview with the author (The Bell public house, Tottenham, North London), Sunday 18th June 2006.

⁴ In addition to the cyborg, Lavender III argues that the clone constitutes the other

category of the posthuman, and is defined as a “genetically engineered human, that is, a human descendant composed of scientifically constructed flesh. It is a copy of an original form, in this case the human form” (2011: 191).